



Syrian Crisis and Energy Geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean

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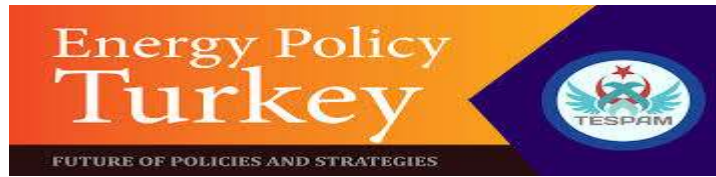
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1- INTRODUCTION

The war in Syria is a large-scale, high-intensity armed conflict fought between government forces in support of President Bashar Al-Assad and civilian groups of rebels whose goal is to gain authority over the country by means of military resistance. Inspired by the Arab Spring events activists, reformists, and civil protesters in Syria began demonstrations in 2011 with peaceful stance against the Ba'ath Party of the Assad government to demand more freedoms, reforms, change of government policies and transition to a democratic state with more respect for human rights. The movement faced a crackdown by security forces of the Assad regime which used violent pressure to dissolve the unarmed protesters. Despite fierce measures, the government failed to contain the escalation of the unrest into an uprising and eventually into an all-out armed conflict in many parts of the country. With large number of casualties and involvement of regular armed forces, the conflict that began as a non-violent revolt against the legitimacy of the regime has been militarized countrywide and turned into a total war. It seems set to continue until fighting parties are exhausted and decide to end it



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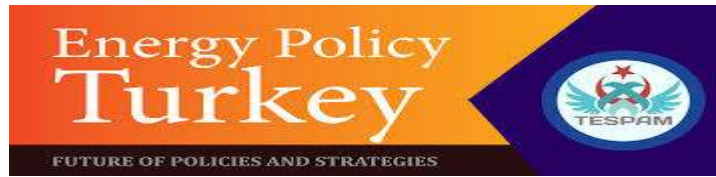
unless, perhaps sooner than later, a political solution appears on the horizon as part the Geneva and Astana talks.

Assad's government forced militarization of this conflict, and consequently, the Syrian crisis created a power vacuum in northern regions that became a breeding ground for terrorist groups, armed insurgents, and rebel factions. The situation stems from existence of different clans and militias who are otherwise not connected but whose common goal is fall of the Assad regime. In full realisation of this difficult task to topple the regime and to claim a victory, the opposition looked for international support for more unity and restructuring to create a "real military institution" that is capable to withstand a full-scale attack.¹

At first, soldiers and low-level officers, then senior military officers defected ranks of Syrian army to join the main opposition group – a grassroots movement from top to bottom – and formed its military wing: Free Syrian Army (FSA). The FSA moved its military headquarters to Turkey in 2012, and with the help of the Turkish national intelligence (MIT), reformed itself to build a unified image as a force with confidence and responsibility.² As the lengthy conflict has limited the potency of Syrian army and weakened its resources, the regime pursued "scorched earth strategy" in rural areas under the banner to fight the insurgents, in essence destroying anything that might be useful to rebel forces,³ sending thousands fleeing to Turkey. Following the Russian intervention in 2015, the Syrian army re-gained much of the territory it lost during the early stages of the war, including Aleppo, and recognised Russia's de-facto "suzerainty" over Damascus.

On the other hand, the PKK/YPG, recognised as a terrorist group by Turkey, EU, and the U.S., was a different faction that took advantage of the power vacuum to carve out a continuous, automatus Kurdish belt in northern Syria. It occupied 40% of the country, including rich oil

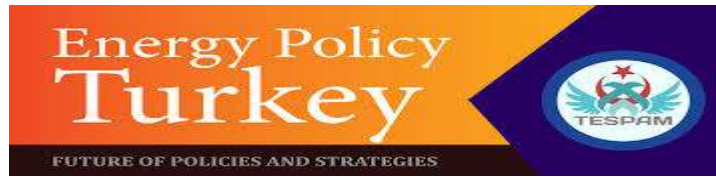




fields on the East, and hoped to gain access to a warm-water port in the Mediterranean to take a major role in the energy future of the region. The group's foothold in Syria would be the first step to setup a Kurdish client state that would then become a launchpad to carve out large chunks of territory from Turkey.⁴ The U.S. has armed this terrorist group, despite loud Turkish discomfort and repeated warnings from Ankara to refrain from doing so. Against the odds, the U.S. State Department capitalised on the group under the pretext of the "war against ISIS", alienating Turkey and raising harsh public backlash against Washington.

In full recognition of an existential threat at its doorstep, Turkey allied with the Russian-Iranian axis and launched the operation "Euphrates Shield" in the wake of the 2016 failed coup attempt, then the operation "Olive Branch" in 2017, and finally the operation "Peace Spring" in October 2019 to topple the YPG/PKK. These were crucial steps towards securing a buffer zone in northern Syria to help re-settle and create livelihoods for former residents displaced during the armed conflict and became refugees in Turkey. Turkey has struck a deal not only with the U.S., Russia, and Iran but also, implicitly, with the Assad regime in Damascus to protect Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity against all separatist armed threats. In particular, the ten-point Sochi deal with Russia refers to the 1998 Adana accord between Ankara and Damascus, revised and updated in 2011. After years of push-and-pull between warring parties, there is apparently a window of opportunity for the first time since 2011 to re-establish rule and order across the country within the auspices of the Astana and Geneva talks, thereby to reach a consensus on drawing a new constitution for Syria.





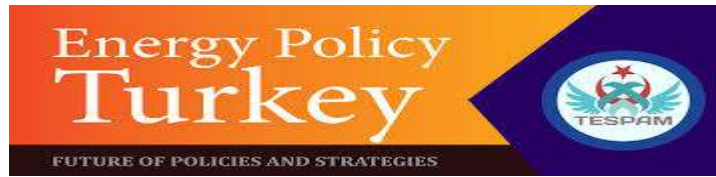
2- GEOPOLITICS OF ENERGY IN SYRIA

At first look, energy does not play a role in the Syrian War, because the country is not a major energy exporter.⁵ Its energy production, be it in the form of hydroelectric power, natural gas, or oil, is mostly spent towards domestic consumption. By 2019, the Syrian regime had control over 30% of the country's energy resources, while the PKK/YPG controlled almost 70% of it and the revenue that could be earned through these resources – equivalent of \$8.5 billion.⁶

There are 2.5 billion barrels (bb) of oil reserves in Syria.⁷ Prior to the 2011 uprising against Assad, Syria produced 385,000 barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil.⁸ Back then a net oil exporter with an average shipment of 150,000 bpd, which is miniscule when compared to oil-rich Gulf countries for instance, the Syrian regime lost control over most of the country's oil resources by 2012.⁹ Presently, oil production in regime controlled areas stands at 24,000 bpd, while the YPG/PKK controlled eastern fields produce an additional 25,000 bpd, a total amount of roughly 50,000 bpd that is 90,000 bpd short of meeting the domestic demand.¹⁰ Iran delivered on average 40,000 bpd of oil per month till 2019, but with the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions that put a stop on imports, oil shortages crippled the Syrian economy in regime-held areas.¹¹

An aspiring Syrian state not only needs a coastline to participate in sea trade and guard against sea powers, but also a cohesive hinterland to provide food, security, and energy.¹² Even if damaged oil facilities are repaired and brought back into production, there is an immediate need to fill the gap by foreign suppliers of oil to Syria. The U.S., according to energy analysts, kept hold of the eastern fields to deprive the Assad regime of access to oil,¹³





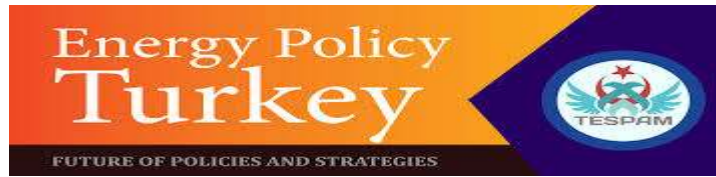
as a consequence of which, and perhaps as part of a “grand bargain” between the two superpowers, Russia emerges as the only potential alternative oil provider. Moscow would certainly want to leverage its position with the Assad regime to Iran’s detriment and gain an upper hand in

Syria’s future reconstruction. Russia also aims to bring Turkey and the Assad regime to the table to initiate a new dialogue, to negotiate directly around the Adana accord, and to normalize ties in their long-frozen bilateral relationship.

The real geopolitical significance of Syria stems from the quest for influence, access, and control over energy routes in the region. At a time of growing emphasis on clean energy and offshore hydrocarbons, recent discoveries revealed sizeable deposits of offshore natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean, especially the Levant Basin, which Syria is part of. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Department’s estimates put Syria’s potential offshore gas reserves to 700 billion cubic meters (bcm), more than double the volume of its onshore gas, while its oil reserves are at a mere 50 million tons, one sixth of its onshore oil reserves.¹⁴ Russia placed

itself on the map as the main power broker in Syria and signed a 25-year concession agreement to explore for oil and gas in Syria’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Irrespective of the actual amount of recoverable gas, Syria might become a key actor in the energy equation if Lebanon, North Cyprus, and Turkey make significant discoveries in their respective EEZs as well. The East Med Gas Forum (EMGF), inaugurated in early 2019 as an alliance of seven countries including Israel, Egypt, Greece, and Jordan to coordinate the regional gas market, would certainly look upon a rival Syria, Lebanon, Turkey axis unfavorably. There are multiple project proposals on the table that compete to gain feasibility appraisal for shipment of eastern Mediterranean gas, either via LNG or pipelines,





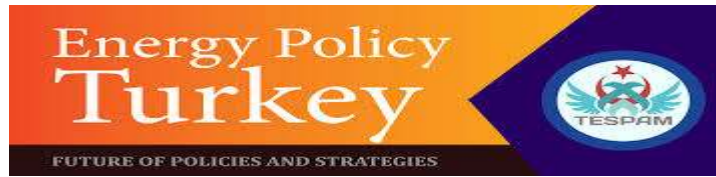
to demand centers of Europe and Asia. If Turkey can foster common commercial interests and create a platform to articulate its rightful stance, thoughts, and proposals among competing stakeholders, it would go a long way to frustrate Greek-Greek Cypriot unconscionable claims against Turkey-Turkish Cypriots and form an alternative alliance in the northeast Mediterranean.

3- RAMIFICATIONS OF THE NEW REGIONAL EQUATION FOR THE EAST MED ENERGY GEOPOLITICS

Since the 1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and Arab countries, there has been only “cold peace”, i.e. formal diplomatic recognition without any deep-nested economic interests or trade links between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan. Israel launched a new foreign policy initiative in 2017 to break this stalemate and build trade relationships, invest in infrastructure, and coordinate a common policy on energy trade with its neighbors. Egypt, especially, has a keen interest to cooperate with Israel and become a regional gas hub.¹⁵ Turkey, North Cyprus, Syria, and Lebanon have been excluded from this alliance due to being in various levels of conflict with most member states of the EMGF.

Turkey is criticized by opposition groups at home and abroad for its wrong doings since the start of the Syria War, but this should not obscure a previously overlooked opportunity that is now on the horizon. If and when Turkey sits at the negotiation table to reconcile its differences with the Assad regime, to re-open embassies and help in Syria’s reconstruction, energy partnership should definitely be a top item on the agenda. Russia is building Akkuyu nuclear power plant near Mersin, Turkey, which is in close proximity to Syria. Together with Russia, Turkey should be the preferred partner for construction of the infrastructure,





exploration, and shipment of natural gas from Syria. This would be the foundation of a new regional energy cooperation deal.

As a starting point, regular ferry schedules linking Latakia, Syria and Gazimagusa, North Cyprus ports should be reinstated perhaps extending them to Antakya, Turkey and Beirut, Lebanon as a confidence building measure. Diplomatic efforts should focus on the Syria regime to

develop trade links with North Cyprus and recognize it as an independent state. This would be an enormous first step towards normalization of relations before moving on to discuss larger themes like energy cooperation and investment. In fact, if realized, this would be a great response in kind to the Arab League's shameful decision to condemn Turkey's Operation Peace Spring whilst supporting illegal offshore drills by the Greek Cypriots.

4- CONCLUSION

The war in Syria has destroyed livelihoods of the local civilian population and created severe spillover effects for neighbor countries that undermine regional stability. With the country slowly rising back on its feet, and YPG/PKK gradually pacified, there is an opportunity for regional cooperation among Turkey, Russia, Syria, Lebanon, and North Cyprus to reinstate trade partnerships, recreate wealth and prosperity for their people. Syria's future welfare is closely linked with rising energy geopolitics in the eastern Mediterranean. Due to a certain sense of competition to gain access, explore, and exploit offshore hydrocarbons, Turkey and Syria can jointly play a crucial role if they can tighten





their ranks against the EMGF and lead the formation of an alternative alliance. In 2010, Ankara and Damascus had signed an agreement to waive visas and expand their bilateral trade, together with Jordan and Lebanon, that would facilitate regional economic integration. It is not too late to revive this initiative. If there is political will on both sides, the right time might have come to cement this much-necessary partnership.

Endnotes

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⁶ Mehmet Çağatay Güler, “The Geopolitical Importance of the YPG-Controlled Areas in Syria,” SETA Perspective, March 2019, No 52 (accessed October 29, 2019); available from <https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2019/03/52.-Perspective.pdf>.

⁷ Ana Haber “Suriye’de Güvenli Bölge”, Prof. Dr. Mustafa Aydın (CNN Türk: İstanbul, 2019) 18:00; available from <https://www.cnnturk.com/videolar>.

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¹⁰ Hafta Sonu “Türkiye’nin Suriye Politikası”, Nerdun Hacıoğlu (CNN Türk: İstanbul, 2019) 10:00; available from <https://www.cnnturk.com/videolar>.

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