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**Energy geostrategies in the Syrian conflict**

**Abstract**

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The dissertation consists of an introduction, seven chapters, a conclusion, scientific contributions, publications, and a bibliography with a total length of 335 pages.

## General characteristics of the dissertation

### I. Relevance

The reasons for the outbreak and deepening of the war in Syria are the subject of wide research interest. The severe consequences of the conflict not only on the Syrian population, but also on the Middle East region and even Europe, motivate researchers to analyse the underlying causes that led to such a large-scale conflict. Various scholarly works have highlighted Syria's role in the broader regional geopolitics and the attempt of external actors to redefine their role as global and regional powers within the changing system of global order, capitalizing on the ensuing chaos and instrumentalizing the existing ethnic and religious divisions in the country.

Another crucial aspect of contemporary Middle East history is the issue of energy, which is much less often included when examining the causes of conflict escalation and external intervention. The energy component is a key part of the political and military games in the region. Although within the fighting in Syria, ad hoc or hard power coalitions and disputes are closely interlinked with the energy strategy of the parties, these aspects are much less studied.

### II. Object, subject of the study and overview of the sources used

**The object of this dissertation** is the conflict in Syria. It is seen as an ongoing multifaceted civil proxy war fought between the Syrian Arab Republic, led by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (supported by domestic and foreign allies) and various domestic and foreign forces, opposing both the Syrian government and each other, in various combinations.

**The subject of the study** is the energy geostrategies of seven countries (USA, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel) in the framework of the Syrian conflict. Energy geostrategy is defined as an investment mechanism for the construction of infrastructure facilities significant to a state's foreign relations, including participation in, obstruction of, blocking of, or competitive alternative spatial duplication of infrastructure projects of regional or global significance. In this regard, the study focuses on oil and gas pipelines, oil and gas processing refineries, natural gas liquefaction terminals, and oil and gas fields.

**The main Bulgarian authors** included in the bibliography are Tsonev and Tsoneva (Syria - War in the Land of Adam and Eve, 2013), Trad (The Murder of a Revolution, 2017), Chukov, VI. (DAESH. (Non)Islamic State, 2016) Stankov (Geopolitical Aspects of the Conflict in Syria, 2019) Chukov, B. (Kurdistan, 2017).

**The main foreign authors are** Phillips (The Battle for Syria: Internatinal Rivalry in the New Middle East, 2020), Wexler (US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality, 2019), Katz (Same Ends but Different Means: Change, Continuity and Moscow's Middle East policy, 2019) Dahl (Impact of the transnationalization of the Syrian civil war on Turkey: conflict spillover cases of ISIS and PYD-YPG/PKK, 2017), Grazewski (The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria, 2021), Almomani (Saudi Arabia's Geopolitical Interests in the Levant and the Threat Perception 2011-2017; 2017)

The bibliography also includes authors who link cross-border projects to build energy routes through Syrian territory to the outbreak of hostilities in the country - Lin (Syrian Buffer Zone - Turkey-Qatar Pipeline, 2016), Virag (Energy strategies in the Syrian conflict. A Central and Eastern European perspective, 2018), Maher and Pieper (Russian Intervention in Syria: Exploring the Nexus between Regime Consolidation and Energy Transnationalisation 2020), Engdahl (The Secret Saudi-US Deal on Syria. Oil Gas Pipeline War, 2014), Costigan (Syria Conflict and Regional Pipeline Geo-strategy, 2017), Taylor (Pipeline Politics in Syria, 2014).

### **III. Objectives, hypotheses and methods of the study**

**The main objective of** the dissertation is to expose the extent to which the policies of global and regional actors in the Syrian conflict - the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi

Arabia, Qatar and Israel - are motivated by their interests in pushing their energy geostrategies in the Middle East region.

Hence the formulation of hypotheses that confirm or deny the research question. **The main hypothesis** postulates that the policies of Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the war in Syria are driven by the laying of competing cross-border gas pipelines - the Qatar-Turkey and the Islamic Gas Pipeline - which are to pass through Syrian territory. The alternative hypothesis suggests that the intervention of external actors in the conflict is driven by broader geostrategic interests related to expanding and protecting their regional influence by establishing partial military-political control over Syrian territory/maritime/airspace.

**The second hypothesis** assumes that coalitions of states are forming around the construction of the two pipelines, supporting or opposing the respective Iranian/Qatari pipeline to pass through Syrian territory, through proxies on the ground in Syria. The Qatari proposal is supported by the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, while the Iranian proposal is supported by Russia. Israel does not support either project, putting forward its own alternative pipeline at a later stage. The alternative second hypothesis assumes that the formation of alliances and coalitions on the ground is rooted in the episodic and partial overlap of their regional interests in the conflict, while the construction, and more precisely the failure to construct the two pipelines, is a consequence of tactical alliances on the ground.

**The third hypothesis** postulates that the clash of the two energy projects, which constitute the basis of the energy geostrategies of the various external actors in Syria, leads to their mutual annihilation and to a deadlock. Therefore, external powers are turning their attention to the oil sector in the country, trying to impose their control over the oil fields and to participate through their companies in their exploitation. The alternative hypothesis considers that the oil interests of external actors in Syria are not the leading, but an incidental element in the foreign policy decision to intervene and remain in the conflict.

**One of the main methods used in the** dissertation is the **political science method**, in which the concept of "political power" occupies a central place. A common element of all definitions of politics is the struggle for resources, rights or privileges. Laswell (1936) defines this struggle as a process of who gets what when and how. At the heart of this struggle is the nature of power, which is a fundamental concept in political science. Power could be defined as the ability

to prevail in the struggle for resources, rights or privileges (Hubert, 2020). According to Joseph Nye Jr. (2003), power is defined as the ability to influence desired outcomes and if necessary, the ability to change the behavior of others in order to achieve them. This is an important political concept because power is not evenly distributed within a state or across states. One line of inquiry into power is directly related to its fundamental institution, the state, in which it is conceived through the emergence of particular institutions that hierarchize the population, create rules and govern them through them, subjecting them to a common will (Pirgova, 2018). The analysis of power is carried out through the resources of power, namely what one possesses and wants to keep and the other in the relation it wants to acquire (Pirgova, 2018). Hence, Syria's energy reserves and related infrastructure are seen as a power resource that external actors intervening in the conflict seek in order to assert their political power both domestically and internationally.

The method that frames the stated hypotheses is **process tracing**, which is an inherently qualitative method of analysis. In its pure form, process tracing is based on a set of tests. These are designed to assess causality and are applied to all the different possible explanations as to how a particular change may have occurred to confirm some and/or eliminate others. Within this study, the different explanations are put forward as hypotheses. The tests are classified based on two criteria:

- The first criterion of whether the test is successful relates to the **need** to establish causation. In this case, if the intervention of external actors in the Syrian conflict is a consequence of their energy geostrategies, then energy companies, contracts with the Syrian government or other proxies on the ground to exploit the country's oil/gas deposits, **or** attempts to block the implementation of other external actors' strategies need to be identified. If there are neither energy companies in Syria, nor signed energy agreements with the various factions on the ground (Syrian government, moderate opposition, Syrian Kurds), nor any attempt to block the aspirations of other external actors to reach such agreements, then their intervention could not be explained by the energy component of the conflict.

- The second criterion relates to the **sufficiency of** the evidence. The mere presence of energy companies in Syria, or an attempt to conclude/block energy agreements by external actors, is not sufficient evidence that their intervention in the conflict is primarily conditioned by their energy geostrategies. However, if a senior official (head of state, government representative or state institution) publicly states that his/her country's intervention in Syria is driven by energy

interests, then this is clear evidence that energy is a key motivator for external intervention. However, this is a rare phenomenon within political science research. Therefore, a thorough analysis of the reasons for intervention - regional, military, geopolitical and energy - should be conducted to compare their strategic weight in the decision to intervene and remain in the Syrian conflict.

The study will also use **a multidisciplinary approach**, combining traditional theories of international relations with political economy and political science. Traditional theories of international relations (IR) refer to the study of geopolitical factors that have led to the ongoing conflict in Syria, such as energy security, military alliances, and the foreign policy imperatives of the key countries involved in the region. To this end, the geopolitical interests of the main foreign policy actors in the conflict - the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel - are to be analysed, along with an analysis of their energy profile and foreign policy energy objectives, against which a comparative analysis will be made of whether there is an overlap between the geopolitical interests of the six states in the conflict and their foreign policy energy objectives. In doing so, the study of the conflict's factual and geopolitical processes also brings to the fore the power lines of rivalry between the different stakeholders. As secondary methods of research, the dissertation employs historical and statistical analysis, desk research and processing of primary and secondary sources of information - books, academic journals, newspapers, government reports, statistical information, economic data from open databases of various agencies, international organizations and multinational corporations.

#### **IV. Structure and Content of the Dissertation**

The content of this study is divided into eight chapters, the first chapter provides a definition of the main concepts used in the dissertation, a brief historical overview of the development of the war in Syria and the Syrian energy sector. In addition, the first chapter provides the reasons why the seven countries involved in the conflict are the subject of analysis. The last sub-chapter of chapter one contains more detailed information on the methods of the research process, their application in previous studies as well as in the present one, and their relation to the hypotheses put forward.

The exposition includes seven chapters tracing three main aspects of external actors in the Syrian conflict, **with the analysis temporally limited to the end of 2022:**

1. Energy profile of the country, including an analysis of the oil and gas sector, main import and export partners, participation in transnational energy infrastructure projects, and key foreign energy policy objectives.
2. Geopolitical interests in the Middle East and Syria of the analyzed external actors in the conflict. This section includes the foreign policy objectives and geopolitical positioning of the seven states analyzed in the region, as well as a historical overview and motivation for their involvement in the war in Syria.
3. The third part of each chapter attempts to identify overlapping elements between the first two aspects in order to highlight the energy geostrategies within the Syrian conflict as the main motive for intervention.

## **V. Summary of the thesis main chapters**

### **USA - Energy Profile and Strategic Objectives in Energy Foreign Policy**

The oil crisis of 1973 represented a turning point in Washington's energy foreign policy, with each successive government seeking to reduce its dependence on oil imports from the Middle East. The US shale revolution raises the question of how much Washington should spend diplomatic and military means to ensure the security of oil flows from the Gulf. Moreover, America is investing resources in safeguarding the maritime oil trade routes, which benefits mainly countries in Southeast Asia, including China, which is seen as a strategic competitor to the US globally.

However, the United States remains linked to international oil markets because any increase or decrease in global supply affects prices and the end user. Although the U.S. is meeting its energy needs, OPEC countries, led by Saudi Arabia, are able to flood the market with additional oil or limit it because they have ample reserves. Washington therefore has a strong interest in preserving the balance of energy markets. This is especially true in the Middle East, where vital U.S. interests such as counterterrorism, nonproliferation, and maintaining regional security to protect allies such

as Israel will remain (Blackwill, O'Sullivan, 2014, pp. 102-114). Rather, what the 'shale revolution' provides the US, is better positioning in the international environment. The situation is radically different from the 1970s when the 'oil weapon' was used as a tool for political pressure. Such pressure could not be imposed by the OPEC countries in the current environment - even with a sharp reduction in oil production in order to raise prices, US dollars would be kept within the domestic market and would not go overseas. Along with this, the physical availability of oil will be maintained.

The shale revolution has eliminated the need for liquefied natural gas (LNG) in the United States, prompting exporters to divert some of their LNG to Europe. In addition, LNG exports from the United States increase competition in Europe along with other suppliers competing directly with Russian gas. Reducing Europe's dependence on natural gas from Russia is a regularly discussed topic in foreign policy circles in Washington. The potential, benefits and importance of reducing Russia's dominant role in the European gas sector have been raised since the Reagan administration. Concerns about dependence on Russian gas supplies have been further heightened following the 2006 and 2009 gas crises between Russia and Ukraine and the suspension of gas supplies to a number of Central and Eastern European countries. This has led to a greater securitization of gas supply issues on the Old Continent, in which the United States has also taken a clear position. The Kremlin's military aggression against Ukraine is leading to a drastic reduction in the share of Russian gas in Europe's energy mix, replacing it mainly with US LNG.

### **US Geopolitical Interests and Positions in the Middle East**

On the eve of the Arab Spring in 2011, the Middle East is a region in transition. The perceived dominance of the United States, already more limited than assumed, has waned since 2009 amid an emerging multipolar world. The Syrian civil war should be understood in the context of these regional changes, both as a symptom and as a subsequent amplifier. The United States still has the greatest influence in the region, but other actors are now asserting or reasserting their geopolitical role. Viewing events in Syria should not be in isolation, but rather as an aggregate part of a sudden and confusing regional transformation.

Obama's decision to abandon the planned strike against Assad in favour of the plan to disarm Russia appears to be one of his administration's most inconsistent decisions regarding the Syrian civil war. Criticism of Obama suggests that he has damaged US credibility by not enforcing



his "red line" militarily and emboldening enemies like Iran and Russia while betraying allies like Saudi Arabia and Turkey. On the other hand, however, US policy has two main priorities: to prevent the spread and use of chemical weapons and to keep the US out of the Syrian civil war. That is why the Russian deal achieves these objectives.

The U.S. response and intervention against IS adds an additional layer of complexity to the internationalized civil war. The reluctance to send significant U.S. ground forces indicates that the days of deploying large U.S. forces to the region are over, even to deal with a clear security threat such as international terrorism. Syria remains an important part of President Trump's agenda, as evidenced by the launch of several Tomahawk missiles in response to Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons. This suggests that isolationism is not driving Trump's policies, but US engagement in the conflict has been rather incoherent, in part because the administration appears to be dividing the war into two: a determined strategy to defeat IS in the east on the one hand, and ambivalence towards Assad, Iran and Russia in the west on the other. Trump's policy toward the Syrian Kurds differs from Obama's, when in May 2017 the White House first announced it would arm them. Trump's attitude toward Assad's two allies, Iran and Russia, is radically different. Trump has remained generally positive toward Russia as he exited the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions on Tehran. At the end of 2018, Syria is divided into three spheres of influence between three global and regional powers - the US, Russia and Turkey. Amid Turkey's third military push into Syria in 2019, the U.S. is withdrawing most of its troops in the country, leaving troops only around oil fields that have fallen under the control of Syrian Kurds. This decision is rather dictated in order to deprive Assad of the Deir ez-Zor oil fields, to squeeze the Syrian economy and to block Iran's land corridor. US policy in Syria under President Joe Biden has been rather incoherent and scattershot. Nearly seven years after the first U.S. troops arrived in Syria, it seems increasingly likely that Washington will withdraw its troops, prioritizing other foreign policy goals such as support for Ukraine and confrontation with China in the Asia-Pacific region. The US military presence in Syria is increasingly seen as a vulnerability rather than a strategic asset.

### **US energy geostrategy in the Syrian conflict**

In addition to blocking access to the oil fields in eastern Syria for the Assad regime and IS Islamists, the Trump administration's other motivation for leaving troops around the oil fields is to provide protection to U.S. oil companies to help the Kurds produce, refine and sell these resources.

In April 2020, Delaware state-registered Delta Crescent Energy received a one-year waiver from sanctions to "advise and assist" the local oil company Jazeera Oil Company in northeastern Syria (Rosen, 2020). For every barrel the company helps export out of Syria, it will receive \$1, according to the production-sharing agreement and the company's application to the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). Delta Crescent Energy was founded by former U.S. Ambassador to Denmark James P. Cane, retired Delta Force officer Jim Reese (both of whom are lobbyists for Republican Senate and Congressional candidates), and John Dorrier, a former oil director for Gulf Sands Petroleum, a British company with experience in oil production in Syria in the years before the war. The U.S. is actively training SDF forces tasked with protecting the fields where Delta Crescent operates. The Critical Petroleum Infrastructure Team, as it is known to U.S. military officials, consists of 200 SDF fighters. They conduct joint patrols with U.S. forces that visit oil facilities three to five times a week to assess the level of protection (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021). Delta Crescent's ambitions to play a major role in Syria's oil sector came to an abrupt end after the Biden administration decided not to extend the company's license to operate in Syria through April of 2021, on the grounds that the US was staying in the country not for the oil but for the Syrian people. Biden sees the license as a symbol of President Trump's reign and the oil lobby interests traditionally behind the Republicans. In conclusion, applying the methodological framework of the study to the main hypothesis, one can assume that the evidence points to a "hoop test" in which the "necessity" criterion is present, i.e. there are US oil companies such as Delta Crescent Energy operating on Syrian territory, but this fact alone is not proof that Washington has intervened in the war primarily for energy interests. The commercialisation of oil in Syria does not have a strategic imperative, as there has been a different approach by Washington when a Republican and a Democratic Party government have been in power respectively. On the other hand, however, it is strategically important for the US to prevent and block attempts by Russia and Iran to impose control over the eastern part of the country, where the oil reserves are concentrated. In this sense, the energetic motivation for staying in the conflict in the first place, rather than for the initial intervention, is relevant and directly linked to broader geostrategic interests pertaining to imposing military-political control and deterring Russian and Iranian influence.

### **Russia - Energy Profile and Strategic Objectives in Energy Foreign Policy**

The Russian Federation is the largest holder of gas reserves and the largest exporter of this resource. Russia's military operation launched in Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally changes the dynamics of Russian gas supplies to Europe. Germany has suspended the certification of Nord Stream 2, with gas deliveries on the completed Nord Stream 1 halted since late August due to technical problems. EU leaders also agree on an embargo on Russian crude oil imports, which comes into force at the end of 2022. Russian oil is sold at significant discounts, making it attractive to buyers in the Asia-Pacific region who do not subscribe to Western sanctions. Russia introduced counter-sanctions starting with a demand for payment for gas supplies in roubles announced in April. In 2022, Russian gas flows to Europe are less than a quarter of the 2021 average, accounting for about 10% of imports. On the other hand, India, China, Turkey and other countries in Asia are likely to disagree with the price cap on Russian oil imposed by the G7 countries, thus it would not fully work. The aim here is for the price cap to give them additional leverage in their negotiations with Russia, which would further limit Moscow's gains from oil sales.

Unlike Europe and Asia, the Middle East does not occupy the same strategic importance for Russian energy foreign policy. Rather, the region is seen as a competitor for Moscow in terms of its energy export markets. The approach to energy-rich regions such as the Middle East tends to be more deterrence-oriented, with elements of co-operation in regulating crude oil price levels within the OPEC+ framework. Moscow also retains a position in Iraq's oil sector, where Russian energy companies Rosneft and Lukoil are involved with stakes in oil field development.

### **Geopolitical interests and positions of Russia in the Middle East**

After the interventions in Libya and Iraq, the Russian elite is determined to prevent any further Western-led military interventions aimed at regime change. The Kremlin's propping up of the Assad regime initially took the form of diplomatic support within the UN Security Council, where Moscow blocked several resolutions. In September 2015, Russia deployed troops to Syrian territory, in part as a means of increasing its influence over Assad. By directly intervening militarily in Syria, Moscow aims to challenge the US-dominated post-Cold War world order, seeking to be recognized as a global superpower. In the Middle East, this means seeking "co-equality" with Washington: presenting Moscow as a legitimate and viable ally and alternative superpower to governments in the region.

Regional strategic and economic issues also play an important role in the Russian military intervention in Syria. Russia continues to maintain ties with Iran's other regional adversaries, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Second, the intervention also serves to manage Iran's regional role but indirectly supports its position in Syria. Economic motives for intervention in Syria also determine Moscow's actions, allowing it to project its military power to the international community. Given Washington's waning leadership in the Middle East, many of the United States' allies in the region, such as Iraq, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, view Moscow as a source to guarantee their security. Moscow's intervention is surely the most significant act of foreign power in support of a country since 2011 and breaks the cycle of balanced interventions to date that have kept the conflict at an impasse.

Russia is also seeking to mitigate the negative social and political impacts of the growing economic catastrophe in Syria. Western sanctions represent a significant obstacle to economic recovery, with little prospect of being lifted in the short to medium term. Moscow is prioritising reconstruction in Syria and seeking to enlist the UAE and other Gulf states to play a key role. At the same time, the Kremlin is strengthening its military infrastructure, focusing on the naval base in Tartus and the air base in Khmeimim. Moscow leases these bases for 49 years with an option to extend for another 25 years, underscoring Russia's long-term ambitions in Syria. Expansion of the capacity of these bases is envisaged to improve operability and productivity. Last but not least, the Kremlin is also maintaining its sophisticated C-400 air defense system in Syria while supplying the C-300 system to the Syrian government.

### **Russia's energy geostrategy in the Syrian conflict**

On oil and gas connectivity, before the crisis began, Damascus entered into discussions about gas and oil pipelines with Egypt, Iraq and Iran. Russia's Stroytransgaz, owned by Russian oligarch Genadi Timchenko, signed an agreement in 2011 with the authorities in Baghdad to connect the oil fields in the north of the country operated by Lukoil and Gazprom with the Syrian port and refinery at Baniyas, 35 km. from the Russian naval base at Tartus (Sasi, 2019). The same Russian company built the section of the Arab Gas Pipeline starting from the Syrian-Jordanian border to the gas compressor station near Homs.

The global confrontation between the United States and Russia, including in the energy sphere, is particularly evident in Syria. In January 2018, an agreement was signed between

Moscow and Damascus, creating a roadmap for the reconstruction of energy assets in Syria. Assad granted the exclusive right to Russian energy giants such as Gazprom, Lukoil, Rosneft, etc. to rehabilitate, modernize and invest in the Syrian energy sector and especially in the oil industry. The roadmaps are the product of previous agreements in which the company Evro Polis, owned by businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, close to President Putin, is actively involved. His activities are directly linked to the Russian Ministry of Defence and its intelligence wing, the GRU (Bellingcat, 2020). As early as late 2016, the company entered into a preliminary agreement with the Syrian government to liberate, protect and develop Syrian oil fields in the east (Malkova et al., 2018). Another important clause of the agreement was that the company would claim ownership of 25% of the oil and gas produced on those areas in Syria handed back to the Assad government. In addition to the energy sector in Russia and its projection abroad, Prigozhin is believed to be closely linked to the Russian paramilitary group or private military company Wagner. It was Wagner's fighters who came under US airstrikes in an attempt to seize one of the oil fields in the Kurdish-controlled eastern Syrian province of Deir ez-Zor in February 2018, a month after the roadmaps for cooperation in the energy sector between Russia and Syria were signed. In other words, at this stage, the US is blocking Russia's attempts to seize energy-rich areas in Syria.

Applying the basic research method, it should be taken into account that the Russian Federation's energy geostrategy in Syria falls within the so-called "hoop test" of process tracing, as there are signed agreements with Russian energy companies for the development of the Syrian oil and gas sector before and after the outbreak of the conflict, but they cannot be interpreted as a fundamental motive for Moscow's intervention and staying in the conflict. Control of hydrocarbon deposits and related infrastructure are part of a broader Russian geostrategy to block US influence and presence in Syria, albeit unsuccessfully in the eastern part of the country where the oil deposits are also concentrated. In this sense, the energy element of Russia's geostrategy has its relevance as far as the consolidation of Moscow's economic influence is concerned, but its implementation is preceded by the imposition of political control, mostly through the Kremlin's military intervention, but also through diplomatic support. The passing of the test does not confirm the basic hypothesis regarding the laying of the Islamic pipeline. The partnership with Iran and hence the support for the construction of the pipeline is intended to counter the informal gas alliance of the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the run-up to the conflict, which is proving unsustainable as the war develops.

## **Turkey - Energy Profile and Strategic Objectives in Energy Foreign Policy**

Strategically located between the hydrocarbon-rich regions of the Caspian Basin, Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf on the one hand, and the energy-consuming and import-dependent European continent on the other, the Turkish political elite emphasizes Turkey's "crossroads role" and aspirations to be a leader in regional energy geopolitics (Scholl, 2017, p. 194).

In terms of crude oil supply, the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which connects the oil fields in Iraqi Kurdistan to Turkey and hence to international markets, plays an important role in setting the dynamics of relations between Iraqi Kurds and Turkey on the one hand, and Syrian Kurds on the other. Turkey has an interest in reducing its dependence on hydrocarbon imports from Russia and Iran in order to gain greater room for foreign policy manoeuvre on a regional scale. The resources of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) are landlocked and represent a source of energy security for Ankara because Turkey is their only possible conduit to international markets, given the strained relations between Erbil and Baghdad. The Turkish authorities see their cooperation with the KRG as a counterbalance to Iranian influence over the Shi'ite central government in the Iraqi capital. The authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan, and Turkey itself, are being hit hard by two separate but interlinked terrorist campaigns in the region: the activities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) against the Turkish state and the capture of large areas of Iraq by the Islamic State (IS) group. This has led to numerous sabotage operations against energy infrastructure, including the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline, leading to supply disruptions and a drop in KRG revenues. As IS captured Mosul, Erbil began to seek US support and, alongside this, mobilised its own military to protect its resources - the so-called peshmerga. Oil exports are being diverted through illegal channels and networks amid a deteriorating security environment. Hence Ankara-Erbil relations are becoming more complicated. The KRG tries to maintain good relations with Turkey, not only because of the importance of the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which passes through its territory, but also because Ankara is an important economic and investment partner of Erbil (Yorucu, Mehmet, 2017, p. 124). From this perspective, the KRG opposes the terrorist activities of the PKK, especially when they are carried out from bases on its territory. Renewed attacks on energy infrastructure, including the February 2016 attack on the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline, undermine the perception of Turkey in its role as a secure energy corridor (Scholl, 2017,

p. 198). Hence, the activation of the Syrian Kurds affiliated with the PKK has a negative impact on the security of the energy infrastructure linking Iraq and Turkey.

Russian-Turkish relations in the energy sphere are an example of pragmatic cooperation, against the backdrop of often opposing positions on regional issues. Ankara and Moscow stand on opposing sides in the conflicts in Libya and Syria, as well as on the Karabakh conflict. However, at the tactical level, the two sides find room for mutually beneficial relations, including in the energy sphere. Turkey also imports gas from Iran via the Tabriz-Ankara pipeline. Apart from the diplomatic and technical challenges in the energy relations between the two countries, the Tabriz-Ankara pipeline has been the target of terrorist attacks by the PKK on several occasions. Unlike relations with Moscow, Turkish-Azerbaijani ties rest on close religious, ethnic and cultural proximity. This is why oil and gas pipelines from Azerbaijan to Turkey and the EU bypass Armenia, passing through Georgia. From energy partnerships with the KRG and Iran, to EU-Russia (energy) relations and gas projects in the Caspian region and the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey's energy foreign policy is both commercially and strategically oriented. Turkey's position on the energy map provides it with opportunities for greater foreign policy manoeuvres and a firmer stance on certain geopolitical issues.

### **Geopolitical interests and positions of Turkey in the Middle East and Syria**

Turkey sees the Arab Spring as an opportunity to promote a new regional order in Turkey's favour. Although Ankara has strong trade ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkish leaders believe Turkey is a better regional hegemon or "third power" with its Islamic democracy, highly diversified economy, and Ottoman heritage. Rather, the "zero problems with neighbors" strategy is the first phase of expanding Turkish regional influence, and the Arab Spring, which at this point seems likely to bring like-minded popular moderate Islamist governments to power, is the next step. With a change of power in Damascus dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Syria could play an important allied role for Ankara in the new regional order in the Middle East.

Once Ankara takes an offensive position against Damascus, the Turkish border becomes the main entry point and supply line for the armed opposition. Erdogan's government has cut all diplomatic ties with the Syrian regime, with the aim of toppling it. And while the US and the UK are stopping the supply of lethal military equipment to the Syrian opposition because of the

increased influence of radical Islamists, Turkey continues to support them in order to achieve its strategic objective.

Russian military intervention and increased Iranian involvement have led to the strengthening of the regime in Damascus and the thwarting of Turkey's plans. In mid-2016, Ankara revised its strategic objectives in Syria, prioritizing the fight against IS and especially containing the Syrian Kurds (YPG) on its borders. As a key U.S. ally in the fight against ISIS in Syria, the YPG has not only received logistical support, weapons, and military training from the United States, but has also effectively managed to seize extensive territory east of the Euphrates River along the Syrian-Turkish border. Ankara has launched several military operations against the YPG in border areas in northern Syria to prevent their overall unification and attempts to establish statehood.

Turkey's ambitions for regional leadership are being dashed as the Syrian "quagmire" blocks it from projecting its influence in the Middle East. The war is contributing to internal challenges within Turkey itself: hosting over 3.6 million refugees, increased domestic terrorism by IS and the PKK, and President Erdogan's shift to more autocratic rule. The Kurdish issue has worsened as a result of the war in Syria, renewing the PKK's guerrilla campaign in eastern Turkey and Ankara's crackdown on it. The presence of the PKK's ally, the YPG, on Turkey's border is forcing Ankara to invade and occupy Syrian territory for the first time in its modern history.

### **Turkey's energy geostrategy in the Syrian conflict**

As early as 2009, when Ankara and its Arab neighbours, including Syria, were on good bilateral terms, Doha and Tehran explored the possibility of a gas pipeline through Syria to Europe. The period coincided with the second gas crisis in Europe, when Russian gas through Ukraine was shut off.

The Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline meets with the approval of the US and the Gulf monarchies, as it minimises Russia's presence in EU gas markets, as well as Iran's participation in the project, which at the time is threatened with new sanctions over its nuclear programme. In 2010, however, Tehran presented the Assad government with a counterproposal to Qatar's - the so-called Islamic Gas Pipeline, or Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline, which would bypass both Turkey and the Gulf monarchies, reaching the Mediterranean coast of Syria and Lebanon. Tehran would thus strengthen



its regional influence in the Shiite-dominated countries (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon) through which the pipeline would pass. Assad rejected the Qatari project and accepted the Iranian one, and on 25 June 2011 a tripartite memorandum was signed in the Iranian city of Bushehr between Iran, Syria and Russia for the construction of the Islamic (Shiite) gas pipeline. By backing the Iranian pipeline project, Syria is also backing Russia's interests, as the Qatar-Turkey pipeline would connect to Nabucco, which Russia sees as a threat to its market position in Europe.

Thus, on the eve of the conflict, the US, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey are behind the Qatari project, while the Iranian project is supported by Russia, Iraq and Syria. This also provides grounds for assuming that Qatar and Saudi Arabia are supporting the Sunni opposition in Syria and financing various 'moderate' Islamist groups in the country, with the aim of overthrowing the regime and bringing to power an Islamist government that would allow the planned pipeline to cross Syrian territory. On the other hand, Iran and Russia see the preservation of Assad's rule as an important prerequisite for securing their geopolitical and geo-economic positions in Syria. Supporting an Islamic gas pipeline through Syria is a more acceptable option for the Kremlin than the alternative route from Qatar. Moscow has closer relations with Tehran than with Doha and could more easily synchronise its energy policies with the Ayatollahs in Iran than with the Qatari emir. In addition, Moscow would also have a direct economic interest in the construction of the Iranian pipeline by participating in its construction. For its part, Turkey would strengthen its role as a transit hub for blue fuel to European markets, while consolidating its alliance with Qatar, with which Ankara shares a common political ideology of support for the MB.

The oil trade is a major channel for financing the activities of Islamist groups backed by Ankara. Since the beginning of the war, a black market for the sale of crude oil for export has been emerging. Although most Syrian oil is transported and sold through private mafia networks, without the active involvement of the Turkish state, there are allegations of links between the Powertrans company, which trades in oil from Iraq and Syria, and the Turkish government. Powertrans is part of the Çalık Group, a large Turkish conglomerate with interests in energy, construction, media and other sectors. Çalık grew rapidly with the support of the government, while its CEO from 2007-2013 was Berat Albayrak, President Erdoğan's son-in-law, Minister of Energy from 2015-2018 and Minister of Treasury and Finance from 2018-2020.

Allegations that Powertrans was involved in smuggling IS oil from Syria have also not been investigated under pressure from the Erdogan government. At the time, it was reported that Erdogan's son Bilal Erdogan and the Maltese shipping company BMZ were involved in the IS oil trade. The main accusation initially made by the Russian government was that Powertrans transported Kurdish oil mixed with crude from IS-controlled wells to the port of Ceyhan, where Bilal's ships delivered it to international markets (Henderson, 2015). The U.S. government also provides some clues as to where IS oil is headed. The U.S. Treasury Department's Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, David S. Cohen claims that IS sold oil at significantly discounted prices to various intermediaries, including some in Turkey, who then transported the oil for resale (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

Placed within the framework of the research method, Turkey's actions and motivations for intervening and remaining in the conflict in Syria could not be explained primarily by Ankara's energy interests. The laying of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline is part of a larger strategy to attract additional gas for the Nabucco project, which envisages gas coming from Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran, as well as along the route of the Arab Gas Pipeline. The relatively small quantities of gas that would be attracted by the Qatari pipeline could not be seen as a sufficient argument either for Turkey's initial intervention in Syria and support for the opposition, or for further military interventions against the Syrian Kurds. Hence, it can be concluded that there is no necessary as well as sufficient criterion to support the hypothesis that the Turkish intervention was justified on the basis of Ankara's gas interests. As far as control of the oil reserves is concerned, the example of the Turkish energy company Powertrans, which involves individuals close to President Erdogan, and its involvement in the trade in Syrian oil controlled by IS, demonstrates the link between oil interests and Ankara's presence and actions in Syria. However, these interests are more commercial in nature, with the aim of benefiting a political elite, rather than strategic defensive and offensive objectives, such as securing a buffer zone in the Kurdish-populated border areas of northern Syria and, consequently, supporting Islamist organisations in the country linked to the MB. The Powertrans example is more of a "hoop" test, where the necessary criterion is present, where Ankara is attempting to control the commercial flows of Syrian oil through its own companies, but lacking the sufficient one to provide evidence that the intervention and staying is precisely a product of the desire to control Syrian oil.

## **Iran - Energy Profile and Strategic Objectives in Energy Foreign Policy**

The Islamic Republic has the fourth largest proven reserves of crude oil and the second largest of natural gas in the world (BP Statistical Review of Energy, 2021). There is no doubt that Iran is strategically important from an energy perspective - its vast energy reserves are hard to ignore in any analysis of international energy. Moreover, the country is located at the crossroads of several energy production and consumption regions (Caspian/Middle East and Europe/Asia, respectively) (Jalilvand, 2018). However, in the international arena, Iran has not yet realized the full potential of its resource base.

In the years following the 1979 revolution, Iran was subjected to a series of sanctions by the West. Tehran re-entered sanctions mode when Donald Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal, plunging the country into its worst economic crisis since the 1980s. The economy is shrinking as the rial loses around 80% of its value against the dollar, fuelling inflation, eroding purchasing power and pushing millions of families into poverty. The sanctions are also seriously affecting economic ties between Europe and Iran. The European Union was Iran's largest trading partner before the bloc imposed oil sanctions in 2012 over the country's nuclear programme. Since then, China has become Iran's main destination for oil exports and largest source of imported goods. Beijing has been the main customer for Iranian crude since Trump's sanctions took effect in 2018. While Europe has been trying to preserve the nuclear deal, it has struggled unsuccessfully to maintain economic ties with Tehran amid Washington's sanctions.

The Democratic Party's rise to power signals that Washington will re-enter negotiations with Tehran to re-enter the US into the nuclear agreement. Iran is demanding that the US lift sanctions on its oil and banking industries as soon as possible as it prepares to increase crude oil production. The return of the US to the framework of the nuclear deal and the subsequent lifting of sanctions remains uncertain. The signatories to the deal began negotiations to bring Washington and Tehran back into the agreement in April 2021, but they have since broken off and continued, complicated by the election of conservative party representative Ibrahim Raisi as president in August 2021 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In addition, Tehran and Washington still disagree on several issues, including the designation of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, a step taken under President Trump's administration.

## **Geopolitical interests and positions in the Middle East and Syria**

The Syrian civil war is pushing Iran into an unfamiliar role. After spending decades trying to disrupt the established regional order, Iran is now trying to consolidate and defend the post-2003 status quo. For the first four years of the conflict, Iran was Assad's most important ally. A key component of Iranian support for Assad is the Lebanese Shiite militia and political party Hezbollah. Syria provides strategic depth, including a major supply line from Iran, as well as legitimacy: the Syrian-Iranian alliance is presented as part of a broader "resistance" on behalf of all Muslims and Arabs against Israel and the West. Like Iran, Hezbollah fears the arrival of a Sunni regime in Damascus, but with another domestic political reason: it could shift the delicate sectarian balance in Lebanon in favour of the Sunnis, at the expense of the Shiites and Hezbollah.

Another major player on the ground fighting on the regime's side is the Quds Force, the external intelligence and military wing of the IRGC. Thanks to the Quds Force, the National Defense Forces (NDF), a paramilitary organization reaching nearly 100,000 men, was created to support the government army. The head of the IRGC, Qassem Suleimani, played a key role in shaping the military strategy. This led to his assassination in late 2019 following a US military operation in Iraq. Once the IRGC was placed on Washington's list of terrorist organizations, this allowed the organization of the operation to eliminate Suleimani. Its removal, however, had no impact on Iran's position in Syria, as the system it introduced survived. In this way, Tehran proves that it is much more experienced in proxy warfare than its rivals in Doha, Ankara and Riyadh. At the same time, Iran is deepening its economic and political involvement in Syria, transforming its relations with the regime. While this does not make Assad an Iranian vassal, as his opponents often point out, the regime is becoming increasingly dependent on Tehran for its political survival. Such deep involvement of Assad's allies has strongly influenced the course of the Syrian civil war. Financial and military support prevent the regime from collapsing under pressure, while the role of Iran and Hezbollah also bring a strong religious divide to the conflict.

### **Iran's energy geostrategy in the Syrian conflict**

In return for its political and economic support for the regime in Damascus, Iran receives significant stakes in Syrian state property and positions in the Syrian economy, serving the economic interests of Iran's political elite and in particular the security forces linked to the IRGC. The two countries signed five major trade agreements in January 2017, covering strategic economic sectors such as telecommunications, energy and transport infrastructure. The majority

of these contracts are related to the reconstruction of electricity equipment, power plants and transmission lines. The agreements include the construction of five 25 MW gas-fired power plants for the city of Aleppo in north-western Syria. Mapna Group, an Iranian company allegedly linked to IRGC, is set to carry out the €130 million project. The company is on the US sanctions list of Iranian companies with close ties to the IRGC. Syria has also signed preliminary agreements with Iran to rebuild Damascus' central gas-fired power plant, as well as gas-fired power plants in the Syrian provinces of Homs and Deir ez-Zor. The Deir ez-Zor plant reconstruction project is being presented as the Syrian army and Iran-led forces move into the centre of the country to retake the region from Islamic State. Based on another memorandum of understanding, Syria is to import 540 megawatts of electricity from Iran into Latakia province. Iranian firms are already involved in a series of electricity generation projects worth \$660 million. Iranian interests in Syria's energy sector are aimed at political effect among Iran's adversaries in the country rather than implementing projects in Syria's oil and gas sector. This is due to Tehran's economic and financial constraints, coupled with sanctions mostly by the US and at certain times the EU, which prevent Iran from attracting investments in its own energy sector as well as making large ones in its allies. The series of contracts to invest in the Syrian energy sector occurred in 2017, when the US did not re-impose its sanctions and Iran could freely trade its oil.

Tehran's investment intentions in Syria are episodic and occur when the country is not pressured by sanctions. On the other hand, by investing in strategic facilities such as gas-fired power plants in Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, Iran secures a strategic advantage and leverage over other players on Syrian territory, including Russia, as well as over the regime itself. In terms of planning cross-border gas infrastructure projects, Iran has put before the regime in Damascus a project to build a gas pipeline from Iran's South Pars gas field, which should pass through Iraq and reach ports in Syria and Lebanon. Between 2010 and 2012, Iran was subject to sanctions, while foreign companies left the country. From this point of view, the financing of the project could not be carried out with Western investment. This means that Iran should seek partnership from other countries such as Russia and China. At the same time, Moscow is concentrating on implementing its own planned gas pipelines in Europe, such as Nord Stream and South Stream. Russia is providing in-principle support for the Islamic Gas Pipeline as it is a competitor to the Nabucco project, whose main aim is to reduce the EU's dependence on Russian gas imports. However, Russia is not providing financial resources or guarantees for the

construction of the pipeline, and after the escalation of the war in Syria, such steps are unthinkable. In this respect, the Islamic gas pipeline is, once again, a political claim and an ambition by Iran for regional influence through energy projects, without, however, having the real tools - geopolitical, financial and technological. Last but not least, the positioning of the Iranian-backed militias near the border with Israel at the very beginning of Tehran's intervention in the conflict, rather than along the route of the proposed pipeline in order to ensure its security, testifies to the low priority level of Iran's gas interests in its intervention in Syria.

### **Saudi Arabia - Energy Profile and Strategic Objectives in Energy Foreign Policy**

Saudi Arabia is the second largest holder of proven oil reserves and the world's leading producer and exporter of crude oil. Most of Saudi Arabia's production is shipped to markets in Asia and Europe. In 2016, Riyadh announced a national transformation plan, Vision 2030, planning to reduce the dependence of its economy and society on oil revenues, which also make it a primary actor within OPEC. After the oil price collapse in 2015, OPEC countries, together with other oil-exporting countries outside the organization, including Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Mexico, among others, concluded the so-called OPEC+ agreement, consisting of a reduction in production quotas to be shared by all producers. OPEC+ thus becomes the main format for setting oil prices, with oil diplomacy between Moscow and Riyadh being key in setting OPEC+ policy. This shows that despite their geopolitical differences over regional conflicts in the Middle East, including Syria, Saudi Arabia and Russia see this cooperation as beneficial to their economies, which depend on revenues from hydrocarbon sales.

### **Saudi Arabia's geopolitical interests and positions in the Middle East and Syria**

Riyadh views Syria as part of a broader set of regional issues that closely overlap and interact with perceived internal threats. Foremost among these concerns are (1) waging a regional counterrevolution against the Arab Spring; (2) confronting Iran and limiting its regional influence; and stemming the rise of the MB and jihadist terrorist organizations that would undermine the religious legitimacy of the royal dynasty in Riyadh. Pulling Syria out of Iran's orbit is a pre-2011 goal, and Riyadh believes replacing Assad with a friendly Sunni-dominated government it helped come to power will achieve that. Limiting the land corridor through Syria to Hezbollah would also hit Iran's position in Lebanon, so both Damascus and Beirut could move into the Saudi orbit. The Saudis see such a step as compensation for the loss of regional influence in Iraq. Saudi Arabia's

pursuit of its goals in Syria is complicated by its simultaneous desire to prevent two forces among anti-Assad groups from seizing power in Syria: the MB and the jihadists.

While Saudi Arabia views the expansion of the MB's regional influence in the MENA region as a threat, Turkey and Qatar actively support the organisation. This rivalry fatally divides the Syrian opposition, leaving it vulnerable in its fight against Assad, but also facilitating the rise of more extremist groups. Ultimately, the kingdom is moving to work closely with CIA-led efforts to strengthen non-extremist rebels, which includes restrictions on the quantity and quality of weapons supplied to the opposition. With the rise of IS and the increasing counterterrorism focus of Western policy, Riyadh's attempt to encourage direct U.S. intervention against Assad is failing. Alongside this is a focus on issues closer to the Saudis' borders: the conflict in Yemen, increasing competition with Qatar, and the internal consolidation of power by Mohammed bin Salman. Thus, Riyadh has become less and less involved in the conflict in Syria and has increasingly withdrawn from it since 2016.

### **Saudi Arabia's energy geostrategy in the Syrian conflict**

Saudi Arabia has no ambitions to be an exporter of natural gas and accordingly does not consider its neighbouring countries as countries through which future gas pipelines could pass. This includes Syria, and it follows that Riyadh's intervention in Syria should not be prompted by a pipeline passing through Syrian territory. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has not historically supported the laying of regional gas pipelines, most notably by Qatar. Thus, the implementation of Doha's proposed gas pipeline is doomed to failure even before it reaches Syria, being blocked by Saudi Arabia. Doha and Riyadh have different foreign policy objectives in the Middle East region, and revenue sharing from the construction of a possible gas pipeline to Europe is not a sufficient motivator for cooperation between the two countries. Although Qatar and Saudi Arabia appeared to be cooperating at the outset of the conflict in Syria, united by the goal of removing Bashar al-Assad from power, it soon became clear that the two countries supported different factions within the fragmented opposition, with the main element of misunderstanding being the MB's role in the future governance of Damascus.

Placing Riyadh's energy geostrategy in the Syrian conflict within the research method, it should be assumed that it falls within the first test of process tracing, a "straw in the wind" that lacks both non-negotiable criteria (the presence of energy companies/agreements with the Syrian

government or other proxy groups) and sufficient criteria (statements by politicians or circumstantial evidence arguing for intervention by energy interests).

### **Qatar - Energy Profile and Strategic Objectives in Energy Foreign Policy**

Qatar is one of the world's richest countries per capita, with the oil and gas sector contributing approximately 90% of all export earnings and 79% of government revenues in 2019. Gas is the main source of income for Qatar, as the country has the third largest reserves in the world after Russia and Iran (BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2021). In this regard, it is also the main instrument for conducting energy diplomacy. With the current energy crisis exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the EU's plans to restrict Russian gas imports through LNG supplies and stop buying Russian gas altogether by 2027, Qatar has emerged as a key actor in the EU's gas diversification strategy. On the other hand, Qatari gas is mainly sold to Asian buyers (over 70%) through long-term contracts, leaving limited room to increase export volumes to the EU. Furthermore, Qatari contracts are inflexible and have restrictions on diversion to third countries for resale of Qatari LNG cargoes. Therefore, in the short term, the EU's ability to import additional quantities of LNG from Qatar depends on the decision of its (mostly Asian) buyers to divert some of their imports and an agreement with Doha to approve these diversions. Nonetheless, in the longer term, Qatar could increase its exports to the EU, contributing to diversification of supply while strengthening Doha's strategic role in European gas markets. This is mainly due to the North Field production expansion strategy undertaken during Doha's years of regional isolation in relation to the Saudi-led embargo between 2017 and 2021 (Ulrichsen et. al., 2021).

### **Qatar's geopolitical interests and positions in the Middle East and Syria**

On the eve of the civil war in Syria, Qatar is in the process of significantly expanding its regional and international influence. Its security was assured after the US agreed to move its air base from Saudi Arabia to Qatar's Al-Udeid base in 2003. In addition, Doha aims to manage its relations with Iran autonomously, improving ties with Syria and pushing an anti-Western agenda on the state-run Al-Jazeera channel. Second, Qatar seeks to expand its regional influence, particularly by disassociating itself from Saudi Arabia. Doha views the Arab Spring as a catalyst for replacing autocratic systems with pluralistic political systems in the broader Middle East, but not in the Gulf region. As with the political opposition, Qatar was most active in its support for the



armed opposition until late 2012, using multiple channels to support multiple groups. One focused on public and financial support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The other is through the MB, supporting militias close to them. The third channel involves support for more radical groups. While Saudi Arabia and the West have expressed concerns about the rise of jihadists since the beginning of the conflict, Qatar has been less cautious. Qatar has reportedly supported radical Islamist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and the al-Nusra Front, reflecting its lack of capacity of its own. Its recourse to informal networks such as the MB due to limitations in Doha's intelligence reach means that it subsequently finds it difficult to control its proxies (Shapiro, 2013). Events on the ground in Syria, which are shifting the conflict decisively in Assad's favour, are prompting Qataris to gradually move away from a hardline maximalist stance in favour of toppling the Syrian regime to one that suggests the regime will make appropriate concessions and reforms, along the lines of Doha's original position.

### **Qatar's energy geostrategy in the Syrian conflict**

**For Qatar**, building the pipeline to Turkey could also not be seen as the country's main motive to intervene in the Syrian conflict. Doha supports the protest waves in other countries in the region - Libya and Egypt - without this support being motivated by a direct energy interest. Moreover, the country is investing heavily in developing its LNG infrastructure, as this would allow the gas to reach markets in both Europe and Asia. The unavailability of Qatari energy companies in Syria testifies to the low prioritization of energy interests in Doha and Riyadh's geopolitical and geostrategic motivations for intervening in the conflict. The Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline project can be seen as a temporary reaction to the 2009 gas crisis in Europe related to the shutdown of Russian blue fuel to the EU. The period is also linked to the lack of a developed LNG market, as the US has not yet advanced its gas industry to allow exports and much of its LNG supply is going to Asian markets due to better pricing conditions. In other words, to break price parity in European markets at this time, Doha is looking at building an onshore pipeline that can compete on price with Russian gas supplies. This ambition is rather short-term and reactionary to the situation on the European gas markets. It could hardly explain Qatar's staying in the conflict after the outbreak of the war, when it became clear that building such a large-scale project was impossible. Thus, Doha's energy geostrategy also falls into the first test of the process tracing - a "straw in the wind" that lacks both non-negotiable criteria (presence of energy

companies/agreements with the Syrian government or other proxy groups) and sufficient criteria (statements by politicians or circumstantial evidence arguing for intervention by energy interests).

### **Israel - Energy Profile and Strategic Objectives in Energy Foreign Policy**

Israel, which has historically been dependent on energy imports, now has a growing gas industry. The discovery of large deposits in Israeli waters has the potential to provide sufficient energy to meet domestic demand while allowing the country to become a natural gas exporter. This situation enables the Israeli government to pursue an energy policy that optimally harmonises the country's domestic consumption and export potential.

Alongside the opportunities, there are a number of challenges due to regional political instability in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. With the exception of Syria, which is embroiled in its own internal conflict, all other littoral states have begun exploration activities within what they consider to be their own exclusive economic zone (EEZ), with a concomitant high potential for conflict. Only Egypt has no disputes with other littoral states, meaning that exploration and extraction activities are taking place without geopolitical difficulties. However, all other states are involved in disputes in one way or another arising from the lack of agreement on the demarcation of the boundary between their EEZs. Examples in this regard are Turkey, Lebanon and Palestine, with which Israel has traditionally had strained and openly confrontational relations.

In addition to supplying its Arab neighbours, with whom it has established bilateral relations (Jordan and Egypt), Tel Aviv is also seeking to become a key exporter of natural gas to EU markets through the so-called EastMed Pipeline. However, with the passage of the European Green Deal and related legislation on the deployment of renewables, EU energy policy is changing radically and no longer envisages new long-distance pipelines. An opportunity for a revival of the project opens up after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the countermeasures taken by the EU to phase out Russian gas imports in the medium term. In this context, in June 2022, the EU, Israel and Egypt signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) under which they committed to work collectively to secure a stable supply of natural gas to the EU. The MoU gives the impression of prioritising LNG supplies from Egypt's existing liquefaction terminals rather than endorsing and supporting the construction of the EastMed pipeline. The Russian invasion also does not significantly change the US position on the issue. According to Washington, the

construction of the EastMed pipeline will take years and the EU needs gas now, which is why LNG supplies should be a priority. Israel is among the most favoured countries in the region, in terms of its diplomatic ties with the US and the EU. Tel Aviv is becoming a regional gas supplier and a source of energy dependence for countries with which it has fought several wars in the past. This evolution in Israel's geopolitical positioning and the regional ties it has forged is helping to ensure that its security is increasingly in its own hands, rather than relying on the US, which is focusing its efforts from the Middle East to Asia.

### **Israel's geopolitical interests and positions in the Middle East and Syria**

Israel is an integral part of the status quo, as regional stability is key for Arab governments. In this respect, the most important Sunni countries in the region actually see Israel as a de facto ally. These include Egypt, the Gulf monarchies (with the exception of Qatar), and Jordan. This is largely due to a shared priority of strategically deterring Iran, but also a shared interest in fighting radical Islamic terrorism and groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. The conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen serve as a warning.

Analysing Israel's role in the Syrian conflict, the country occupies an ambivalent position in the regional landscape in the early years of the Syrian civil war. It remains uncommitted to the politics of most pro- and anti-Assad camps, yet it is the only regional state willing to use its air force to achieve its goals. Tel Aviv faces a dilemma when war breaks out. Defeating Assad would remove a longtime enemy of Israel, striking a blow against Iran as well. At the same time, removing Assad would reduce state sponsorship for Hezbollah and Hamas, allowing Israel to strengthen its control over the occupied Golan Heights and West Bank. However, Assad is a known adversary, taking no active steps to threaten the Golan Heights or prevent the creeping annexation of West Bank territory. Something worse could come his way: a Sunni Islamist regime under the auspices of the MB, backed by Qatar and Turkey, which might be more inclined to challenge Israel, or a jihadist-led semi-state occupation headed by the al-Nusra Front or IS, which could launch attacks targeting the Golan Heights or northeastern Israel. This possibility is very real at the beginning of the conflict, given that in 2011. The MB came to power in Egypt, a direct threat to the Jewish state. In other words, a protracted civil war, weakening both the regime and the opposition, actually serves Israel's interests. If either side won, neither would be strong enough to

pose a serious threat for years, whereas if the war dragged on and Syria became a failed state or divided, a potentially strong neighbor would disappear.

Therefore, Israel is not overly concerned about ending the war, but has serious concerns that Hezbollah and Iran may come out stronger than it. Assad's collapse could trigger a transfer of high-tech weaponry, including chemical weapons, to Hezbollah. Second, as Iran increases its presence, turning Syria from an Iranian ally into a direct proxy would give Tehran another frontier (along with Lebanon) from which to initiate attacks against Israel. These fears seemed to be confirmed when Hezbollah fighters replaced the Syrian army along parts of the frontline in the Golan Heights from 2013. In response, Israel's direct interventions in Syria have largely been directed against Hezbollah. In terms of Moscow's Syria policy, a top priority is to ensure that Russia, now at war with Hezbollah and Iran against the opposition, does not prevent Israel's strikes against the Kremlin's new allies. Tel Aviv recognizes that in the changed security environment, a successful working relationship with Russia is necessary to ensure Israel's freedom of action against Iran in Syria. Perhaps the most important issue for Israel as it launches attacks on Syrian territory is to protect its control of the Golan Heights and minimize the potential for Hezbollah attacks in that direction. Israel can be seen as one of the main losers in the war as the Assad regime reasserts itself, more dependent on Iran and protected by Russia, whose first priority is to stabilize the Assad regime, not to counter Iranian influence in the country (Tsurkov, 2018). And while the outcome in terms of the Iran-Hezbollah conflict is ambiguous, in other respects Israel gains from the Syrian civil war, mostly because of Damascus's greatly reduced military capabilities following the removal of most of its chemical weapons. Another important gain for Israel from the war is that the Jewish state's claim to the Golan Heights has been significantly strengthened. During Trump's administration in the White House, he became the first world leader to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights in 2019. Israel has not influenced the outcome of the conflict in Syria much, but has taken successful limited actions to secure maximum benefit and protect its national interests.

### **Israel's energy geostrategy in the Syrian conflict**

The war in Syria is allowing Israel to consolidate its position in the annexed territories of the Golan Heights. Although these steps are for the most part motivated by military-strategic calculations, the presence of the Jewish state in the Golan has its energetic component. In April

2013, the Petroleum Council of Israel's Ministry of Energy and Water issued a license to the American company Genie Energy to conduct oil and gas exploration and drilling in the southern Golan (Eldar, 2013). The founder of Genie Energy is American Howard Jonas, a millionaire of Jewish descent and a lobbyist for the Republican Party (Eldar, 2013). In addition, the director of the Israeli branch of the company is Effie Eitham, a Brigadier General in the Israeli Defense Forces and former Minister of Construction and National Infrastructure of Israel. In February 2015, exploratory oil drilling began by Afek Oil and Gas, a subsidiary of Genie Energy. However, despite loud announcements, in 2017 Afek suspended its drilling program in Golan, stating that "there is no current plan for a next phase of Afek's activities." The cessation of drilling in the southern Golan region comes amid gas discoveries offshore Israel, which has attracted investor interest in the region.

Against this backdrop, it could be summarised that oil drilling in the Golan Heights is motivated primarily by the Israeli leadership's desire to strengthen and consolidate its control over this disputed territory, rather than to provide greater energy security for the country. Consequently, Israel's intervention in Syria is primarily motivated towards deterring Iran and Hezbollah and creating a buffer zone between their positions and Israeli territory. In itself, oil production in the Golan is a secondary priority, but at the same time, it reveals the interplay between the circles of the military-political elite in Israel and the US and oil companies such as Genie Energy, in their quest to reap not only political but also direct economic dividends from the war in Syria and the regime's inability to oppose the oil exploration and drilling activities undertaken in the Golan.

Israel's energy geostrategy in Syria has more of a "blocking" element to prevent the passage of major infrastructure projects backed by geopolitical enemies such as Iran and the MB, backed by Qatar and Turkey. Israel has its own quantities of natural gas to reach international markets, via the liquefied natural gas terminals in Egypt. Thus, Tel Aviv is prioritizing the production and export of its Mediterranean reserves, focusing mainly on regional markets (Egypt, Jordan) in order to create an interdependent relationship that would fend off any attempts by Cairo or Amman to support the Palestinian cause. Thus, Israel's energy geostrategy aims to isolate Syria in terms of regional natural gas flows and attract those Arab states with which Tel Aviv maintains diplomatic relations. Despite the presence of Israeli energy companies in the Golan, whose members have great influence on political and economic processes in the US (the example of Genie Energy),

refracted through the method of the study, their presence constitutes more of a 'hoop test', meeting the necessary criterion (presence of energy companies) but not the sufficient one.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Applying process tracing to the energy geostrategies of external actors in the Syrian conflict, the study draws several key conclusions:

1. Given the wide-ranging geopolitical interests of external actors in the Syrian conflict, it should be assumed that their involvement in the war is not primarily motivated by a desire to advance their energy geostrategies, which include controlling or blocking access to strategic energy infrastructure in Soroya - oil and gas fields, pipelines and refineries. Arguments highlighting the importance of the energy component in the conflict are too economically reductionist to fully appreciate the motives of external actors for intervening in Syria. Moreover, the dynamically changing characteristics of the conflict - the presence of new actors both on the ground and externally, the emergence of disagreements between allies (Saudi Arabia; Turkey and Qatar), and the higher energy priority relative to other regions/states - do not indicate a strategic targeting of their energy policy in Syria, but rather a tactical and situational adjustment to the dynamics on the ground. In this regard, long-term energy explanations are part of the overall military-political approach to intervene in Syria, mainly expressed in supporting/overthrowing the Assad government, as remaining or, respectively, coming to a new government in the country, opens or preserves opportunities to influence not only the energy sector in Syria, but the overall political-economic development in the country.

2. Although the definition of energy geostrategy overlaps with the attempts to push through and respectively block the two competing gas pipelines from Qatar and Iran, a deeper analysis reveals their declarative-political nature rather than real steps towards their implementation. Neither Qatar nor Iran has the necessary diplomatic and economic tools to push through these grandiose projects, especially since, as the conflict deepens, their implementation is unthinkable. The construction of the pipelines is the optimal scenario, albeit idealistic, not only for Qatar and Iran, but also for the countries supporting the projects - Russia, the US and Turkey. For Moscow, the Iranian pipeline represents the alternative spatial duplication of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline,

whose destination is again Europe, but under Russian and Iranian control. However, Russia prefers to maintain its monopoly over markets in Europe without the need to coordinate with Iran. Faced with a choice, however, Russia would favour Iran's so-called Islamic pipeline over its Qatari competitor. For Washington, the Qatari pipeline is a means of reducing the EU's dependence on Russian gas, while for Ankara, the project reinforces its role as a major transit country for hydrocarbons from the Middle East to Europe. In contrast, Israel and Saudi Arabia have no interest in building either pipeline. Israel has its own energy resources and is seeking to push through its own project, the East Mediterranean Gas Pipeline. For its part, Riyadh has historically not supported the construction of gas pipelines from Qatar to neighbouring Gulf states (Kuwait, UAE). Moreover, the Kingdom regards the connection via pipeline of Qatar and Turkey, countries supporting the MB organisation, which is banned in Saudi Arabia, as highly unacceptable.

3. And while gas infrastructure and fields are not a primary motive for the seven countries' interventions in the war, oil trade and oil fields are of interest to almost all intervening countries except Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The paper analyses how various energy companies linked to the political elites in the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran and Israel seek to impose control over the country's oil fields and commercialise them for their benefit and for the benefit of their proxies on the ground. It is important to note that these are small companies, not the leading energy companies in these countries, which risk tarnishing their credibility in return for the relatively small quantities of oil they would have produced in Syria.

4. All of these operations by foreign energy companies against Syria's oil fields lack the depth to be identified as a leading element of the energy geostrategy of external actors in Syria and their primary motive for their initial and continued intervention in the conflict. The focus of the major energy companies is drawn to the gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean, and in this regard, Israel is best positioned to implement its plans to build a pipeline to serve European markets. In this way, the Gulf region will continue to supply Europe with oil and gas mainly by sea, as the geopolitical situation does not suggest the construction of pipelines. Topics for further research in this respect would include the possible linking of the Gulf fields with those in the Eastern Mediterranean and the role of the Abrahamic Accords and Saudi Arabia in this respect. As regards Syria, the country is entering a period of economic recovery, with a number of Arab countries, including Gulf states such as the UAE, having already resumed bilateral diplomatic relations. In

this regard, an interesting research question would be to what extent the Arab Gas Pipeline, which passes through Syrian territory, could be restored and expanded, reaching Turkey, as was its original route. and possibly who would invest in this project as part of Syria's reconstruction programme. Last but not least, while at the beginning of the conflict in Syria, the role of natural gas was seen as strategically important for the EU's energy future, more than a decade later gas is seen more as a transitional fuel, and Brussels' long-term efforts are focused on achieving full decarbonisation and fossil fuel divestment. The war in Ukraine, however, has once again brought the issue of securing gas supplies to the fore, given the sharp deterioration in relations with Russia and the reduction of Russian gas imports into the EU.

## **VII. Annex: analysis of current regional and global trends affecting the conflict in Syria**

Despite the temporal limitation of the study, the constant changes in the evolution of the conflict create the need to outline major events in 2023, setting new dynamics on the ground but also in the relations between external actors in Syria. The research paper highlights several important developments:

1. The continuation of the military strikes by Turkey against the Syrian Kurds, in particular the oil infrastructure, which represents a major source of funding.
2. The readmission of Syria back into the Arab League, underlining Saudi Arabia's new approach to regional security.
3. The conflict between Wagner and the Russian authorities, leading to its replacement by another private army, Redout, which also aims to protect Russian energy assets in Syria.
4. The contract between Lukoil and the Iraqi government to double crude production from the West Qurna 2 field is intended to keep the West out of Iraq's energy deals and simultaneously bring Baghdad and Damascus closer to the new Iranian-Saudi relationship brokered by Beijing.
5. How the 2023 war between Israel and Hamas affects the Iran-Israel and Iran-US rivalries in Syria.



## Scientific contributions

I. The research paper brings out the concept of "energy geostrategy" in a broad sense. The definition is based on the views of Rusev and Avdzhiev (2014) on the types of geostrategic external mechanisms. An energy geostrategy is an investment mechanism for the construction of infrastructure facilities that are significant to a country's external relations, including participating in, obstructing, blocking, or competitively alternative spatial duplication of infrastructure projects of regional or global significance, including oil and gas pipelines, oil and gas processing refineries, natural gas liquefaction terminals, and oil and gas fields.

II. The dissertation systematizes the energy geostrategies and regional geopolitics of the seven countries under consideration - the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel - in relation to the conflict in Syria.

III. The study identifies a uniform approach of the countries analysed (five out of seven, excluding Qatar and Saudi Arabia) towards the Syrian oil sector. Hence, it can be concluded that irrespective of the state under consideration (democratic/autocratic; global/regional power;), the same tactics are observed - both forceful (through the presence of military and paramilitary groups) and shadowy (through the involvement of small businesses in the Syrian oil sector).

IV. For the first time in Bulgarian political science, the means of foreign companies in penetrating the Syrian energy market are analyzed, using relatively small capitalization energy companies. Case-by-case examples are provided, and their direct linkage to the military-political elite is traced:

1. USA → Delta Crescent Energy → James P. Kane, Jim Reese, and John Dorer;

2. Russia → Evro Polis → GRU → Wagner → Yevgeny Prigozhin

→ Stroytransgaz → Redut → Gennady Timchenko

3. Turkey → Powertrans → Berat Albayrak

BMZ → Bilal Erdogan, Mustafa Erdogan, Ziya Ilgen;

4. Iran → Marpa Group → IRGC → Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic Ali Khamenei.

5. Israel → Genie Energy → Howard Jonas, Dick Cheney, James Woolsey;

V. The scientific work provides an opportunity for practical application of the concept of "energy geostrategy" and its operationalization in the work of Bulgarian energy policy and diplomacy.

## **Publications**

1. "Energy co-operation between the EU and Iran - Future challenges and the way forward" in **Neykov, S.** (ed.) *Energy Diplomacy (2019)* Sofia.
2. "The Dynamics of American Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict. The role of the shale revolution", *Doctoral Readings*, Vol. 3 2019, pp. 275-295
3. "More than meets the eye? The EU Energy and Climate Diplomacy towards the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries", in **Neykov, S.** (ed.) *Energy and Climate Diplomacy (2020)* Sofia: Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute, pp. 72-94
4. "Energy Geostrategies in the Syrian Conflict. *Kliment Ohridski*" Vol. 5 2020, pp. 377-399