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Why Russia is Fighting Qatar and Competing Iran

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An alternative perspective on the civil conflict in Syria is inevitably linked with energy and geostrategic implications. Unlike the case of Iraq, when the discussion comes to the causes of the conflict in Syria, more often than not energy does not occupy a large part of the analysis. The recent Russian intervention in Syria is strongly related to energy security. Looking at Russia from the perspective of an energy giant – from which Europe is strongly depended (80% of its natural gas imports annually from Gazprom) – one can easily understand what Putin is looking for in Syria.

Bigger than Zohr

In the late 80s, Qatar and Iran were not in conflict when it came to bilateral relations and interests in the region. After 1989, they jointly developed the giant reserve South Pars / North Dome, which was located at a depth of three kilometres in the Persian Gulf. This deposit makes Leviathan and Zohr look like dwarfs. With 51 trillion cubic meters of gas (and nearly 50 billion cubic metres of liquid concentrates) it is the largest gas field in the world. The layout of the field led the two countries to cooperation (one third of the reserve extends into the Iranian EEZ and the rest in that of Qatar). The rest is known: Qatar became a superpower in Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) while Iran remained isolated on the availability of its own huge reserves. Afterwards, crises and conflicts erupted in the region, especially after the spring of 2011, and the so-called “Arab Spring.” In turn, Qatar and Iran found themselves involved in a proxy war over Syria.

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Lines of Power

Shortly before the war in Syria, Iran and Qatar were also competing with Russia in the energy sector. Russia managed to exclude both countries from the competition of the European market where it has been maintaining a monopoly for decades. In the case of Qatar – a valuable example a lesson for Cyprus’ energy strategy as well – the cost of liquefaction of its hydrocarbons was so high that never enabled the country to compete Russian natural gas. Iran on the other hand, under the weight of its bad relations with the West, was unable to overcome international isolationism.

In 2009, the authorities of Qatar proposed the construction of a pipeline that would link the reserves of the region with Turkey, through Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria. The Assad regime never allowed this. Mainly because Damascus received, back then, a signal by its strong energy ally: Putin. At the same time, Iran proposed an alternative route from Iran to Syria, through Iraq, which would link the country's reserves with the ports in the Mediterranean – e.g. Tartous and Latakia in Syria. In this case, Moscow was positive for its own strategic reasons, including the markets of the Caspian and Asia. The agreement was ratified in 2011 and the relevant documents were signed in July 2012. Then, the war broke out.

Strange Days

Iran and Qatar moved from potential energy partners to being opponents fighting in Syria. Iran supported Bashar Al Assad with weapons, expertise, Hezbollah and the elite body of the Revolutionary Guards (Al Quds). Qatar, has spent in four years nearly 3 billion dollars on the Sunni opposition by even creating Salafist groups like the Islamic Front or by helping out fighters and political circles related to the “Islamic State” and the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda (Jabhat Al Nusra). The two powerful

countries were limited to a war of attrition which, in light of developments in Syria, has become fragmented. A real stalemate with enormous cost for both of them.



The two proposed pipelines (Source: Times of Israel)

Meanwhile, Iran, in the aftermath of the framework agreement with the West for its nuclear programme, managed to gradually come out of its international isolation. In this powerful regional competition, Russia remained, despite its support for Assad, rather neutral. It maintained a twofold approach which aimed at: competing with both Iran and Qatar in terms of the European energy market. Iran is however the priority as Russia has long been trying to maintain Tehran's dependence on it by anchoring for its interests on the international stage. So for Russia's "wait and see" approach, intervention in Syria came at a crucial time. Not only for the outcome of the war and the fate of its friend and ally Assad, but also for the shaping of a "grand picture" in



the whole area after the war. After all, “all wars come to an end” as the great Russian general Dmitry Milyutin once pointed out.

A Russian doctrine

Russia is not interested in the fate of the Assad regime. It mainly wants to ensure that neither the Iranian nor the Qatari natural gas will in the future constitute a cheaper option for Europe's energy dependence on Russia. A pipeline from Qatar or Iran, that would pass through Syrian territory, would form the basis for a settlement agreement on the Syrian drama and lead: (a) to the fall of gas exploration and exportation costs, which would negatively affect the Russian state budget at difficult times for the country; (b) to direct competition of Russian gas monopoly to Europe's market shares and (c) to the reduction of Iran's dependence on Russia, thus rendering Tehran a standalone player.

A short epilogue

This energy-based approach may not be the best theoretical tool for explaining the Russian intervention in Syria. And yet looking at another Russian intervention of recent years could lead to useful conclusions. Some academics that what we are witnessing is continuation of “reasonable efficiency” foreign policy doctrine. The same doctrine that led to the 2008 Russian intervention that aimed to make sure that the West will not export gas from the Caspian Sea through Azerbaijan (a country-ally of the Kremlin). The Russians fought in Ukraine to ensure that Kiev, transiting Russian gas to Europe, will not fall under the West's sphere of influence. Now in Syria they are bombing Sunni insurgents, mainly Qatar allies, in order to send a message to Tehran: Russia will not tolerate Iran as an independent player in the region, it can only be under its own influence. The coming weeks will prove particularly useful for drawing further conclusions with regard to the direction of Russia’s involvement in Syria. The energy dimension is nevertheless expected to mark developments in Russia’s



relationship with Turkey and Turkey's relationship Turkey with the West. Lastly, Cyprus and its regional energy plans should draw upon these experiences as they move forward.