Covert "Gas Wars" between Israel and Turkey

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The events at the end of 2024 in Syria have revived the international agenda on the trans-regional energy route from the Persian Gulf to Europe. The project was first discussed in detail in 2009, after Vladimir Putin's famous Munich speech of 2007 about the need to reorganize the unipolar world, when the West began to look for opportunities to move away from Russia's "gas hegemony" in Europe, which Moscow used to promote its interests in the EU, increase its budget, revive its military-industrial complex, and thus make its voice more significant on the international stage.

The project, developed within the framework of the above goal, involved laying a gas pipeline along the Qatar–Saudi Arabia–Jordan–Syria–Turkey–Bulgaria route. It was expected that Qatar's 25 trillion m^3 of proven gas reserves would fully cover the needs of European countries for decades to come. However, the political situation in the region hindered the implementation of the project, and one of the main obstacles was Syria, led by Bashar al-Assad, who refused to participate in this international consortium and closed its territory to the gas route. Some experts believe that this was one of the reasons for the global change in the situation in the Middle East and the Maghreb countries, known as the *"Arab Spring"*. Its goal was to eliminate the "non-system" Arab regimes such as those in Libya, Syria, and Egypt, which, among other things, were opposed the transformation of trade and energy systems in the vast region. Libya's leader Muammar Gaddafi spoke openly about this and predicted that after Libya, Syria would be the West's next target. Bashar al-Assad, with the support of Moscow and Tehran, held onto power much longer than Gaddafi. However, the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war on February 24, 2022, deprived him of the opportunity to take full advantage use Russian military and diplomatic support. Experts believe that after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the economic crisis in Iran, and the death of the tandem Ebrahim Raisi–Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in a helicopter crash on May 19, 2024, the fall of the "Assad regime" became inevitable. At that time, the main beneficiary of the change of power in Damascus was not the collective West, but Turkey. There is an opinion that Ankara needed to accelerate the internal Syrian transformation in order to quickly revive the already forgotten Western project of a trans-regional gas route from Qatar to Europe, which could turn Turkey into a major continental gas hub.

According to Arab sources, the day after the announcement of the formation of the interim government in Damascus, Ankara issued a directive to Mohammed al-Bashir, the interim prime minister of Syria, to prepare the legal and technical basis for negotiations on the Syrian section of the future gas route. On January 9, 2025, it was announced that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar were engaged in intensive negotiations on the construction of pipelines through Jordan and Syria to Turkey to transport Qatari gas and Saudi oil further to Europe. On January 12, 2025, Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan held talks in Riyadh on Syria with the heads of the foreign ministries of about a dozen Arab countries, and the gas issue was presumably one of the central topics on the agenda.

[1] The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 21.01.2025.

Judging by Turkey's actions, Ankara wants to show the West that the proposed project is viable and, despite the excessive cost of its implementation and geopolitical complexities, is the most reliable way to deliver energy resources from the Persian Gulf to the European market. This is crucial for Turkey because, over the past two decades, president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been purposefully moving towards the idea of turning the country into a gas hub, channeling Russian, Iranian, and Qatari gas flows. The "Iranian option" had to be abandoned due to Western sanctions against Tehran. Negotiations on Russian gas were delayed due to the same Western sanctions and the parties' limited ability to build the necessary infrastructure independently without international investments. Additionally, the parties disagreed on pricing and the structure of the so-called "Gas exchange" in Turkey.

After V. Zelensky's statement about Ukraine's refusal to allow any further transit of Russian gas through Ukraine, Moscow began to hasten projects not yet discussed with Turkey. On January 9, 2025, the Russian media, citing the informed periodical *The Moscow Times*, reported that Gazprom is urgently closing its offices in Europe and relocating their employees to Turkey, renting apartments for them and organizing Turkish language lessons. For Ankara, this step by the Russian company would be considered significant in the context of its gas ambitions. However, as it became known, optimism in this case is premature. On January 11, 2025, the Russian ministry of defense reported that Ukrainian drones had attempted to attack the Russian gas compressor station "Russkaya" located near the city of Anapa in the Krasnodar region, through which gas is pumped into the "Turkish Stream" offshore pipeline in the Black Sea. This is the first strike by Ukrainian forces on the "Turkish Stream" infrastructure and may not be the last. Kremlin spokesperson D. Peskov has already stated that Ukraine would not have dared to initiate such an attack on its own: *"The beneficiary of all this is the United States, which is consistently increasing supplies of liquefied gas to European markets. Moreover, this gas is sold at very inflated prices"*.

D. Peskov's statement can certainly be considered justified, since given its close relations with Ankara, Kyiv would hardly have made an independent decision to undermine Turkish economic interests. The strike on the compressor station may indicate that its initiators are quite capable of attempting to undermine the actual offshore pipeline, as was the case with the "Nord Streams" in September 2022. In any case, the only remaining operational route for the delivery of Russian pipeline gas to Europe is also under threat. Considering this, Turkey has every reason to believe that the attacks, not sanctioned by Ukraine, are deliberately aimed not only against Moscow but also against Ankara itself and its plans to become the main operator and distributor of blue fuel entering the EU.

Perhaps Ankara would have no reason to suspect Washington of an anti-Turkish energy policy if Turkey were not currently facing difficulties with the Qatari gas project. These difficulties are real and are mainly related to Syria and the Kurdish issue, where the plans of Washington and its closest ally in the Middle East, Tel Aviv, radically differ from those of Turkey. It is about Ankara's desire to keep Syria as a unified state, while the USA and Israel are objectively obstructing these plans, as the ARVAK Center has already written in previous publications. The success of Turkey's initiative to revive the trans-regional program for the Qatari gas route to the EU is closely tied to the current situation in Syria, particularly regarding the Kurdish issues.

Analysts agree that Ankara will have to abandon the idea of laying the Qatari pipeline if it cannot maintain Syria's unity with a strong centralized government and put an end to the *"separatist Kurdish movement"* both in Syria and in Turkey itself. International investors will not invest in a project associated with problems of a 1000 km long zone of permanent destabilization from Jordan to the southeastern Kurdish-populated areas of Turkey.

Ankara is well informed about investors' sentiments, and long before the recent events, it prepared an alternative plan for gas logistics from the Persian Gulf region. Over the past few years, R. Erdogan's team has developed a concept to replace the aforementioned gas route with the *"Iraqi alternative"* if necessary. This project includes not only the laying of gas and oil pipelines but also a railway and highway from the Gulf along the entire territory of Iraq to the Turkish border. In order to implement such a large-scale project, Ankara even decided to make concessions to Baghdad on the "water issue" and increase the flow of water from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers to the Arab state, which it had categorically refused to do in previous years. On April 22, 2024, Erdogan arrived in Baghdad for the first time in 12 years, where, in addition to agreements on water quotas and joint security measures, his team also signed memoranda with the Iraqis on the development of the Grand Faw (a port in southern Iraq) – Mersin (a port in Turkey) trade and energy route. The project has been dubbed the *"Development Road"* or unofficially the *"Dry Canal"*, implying that its infrastructure will be able to fully transport all cargo arriving in the Persian Gulf by sea to Europe via land.

According to *Rail Freight*, only the construction of the railway will require about $18 billion, while the cost of other communications is not publicly available.

It may seem that the Iraqi combined freight and energy transport route to Turkey is quite promising, especially considering that it has received support from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). According to analysts at *Logistics. Today*, it also fits in with the EU's new initiative "Global Gateway" to *"strengthen the continent's infrastructure, telecommunications, and energy supply"*. However, like the Syrian gas route, it also has its "pitfalls." Firstly, the position of the Saudis, who will have to make their territory available for the laying of gas pipelines from Qatar to Basra in Iraq, is not entirely clear. Secondly, for Turkey, the issue is again tied to the "Kurdish problem", because north of Mosul, the planned communications must again pass through Kurdish-populated areas of Iraq. In contrast to the Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Iraq under the leadership of the pro-Turkish Barzani clan, practically the entire strip of the Iraqi-Turkish border is controlled by the hostile Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has almost fully synchronized its steps with the informal administration of Kurdish Rojava in Syria and its combat forces. Turkey is practically incapable of ensuring the security of this route even in cooperation with the Iraqi army, despite the corresponding agreements between Recep Erdogan and his Iraqi counterpart Abdul Latif Rashid and the prime minister of the republic of Shia al-Sudani in April 2024 in Baghdad.

Probably this could have been a solvable task for Turkey if the USA and Israel had not intervened and methodically advanced their own plans for the region and its transportation and energy communications. The recent statements and actions of Washington and Tel Aviv regarding the support of Kurdish rights to establish statehood in their areas of habitat in

Syria and Iraq suggest that the United States and Israel are openly obstructing Turkey's plans regarding the resources of the Persian Gulf. This circumstance sheds light on the reasons for the disagreements between Israel and Turkey regarding the future of Syria and also of Iraq.

It seems obvious that the US-Israeli tandem does not want to establish a *"belt of stability"* along Turkey's southern borders and in the Black Sea basin, thereby creating obstacles to its economic interests. To this end, Tel Aviv insists on the federalization of the new Syria, and the United States, for its part, does not complete the defeat of ISIS on the Syrian-Iraqi border. In both cases, the Kurdish factor is a crucial element in the arsenal of Washington and Tel Aviv to suppress Ankara's ambitions and disrupt its plans to establish hegemony over the entire expanse of the Middle East and Maghreb.

The rivalry between Israel and Turkey for regional supremacy and control over mineral resources and their transportation began long before the aforementioned events. Turkey received the first serious blow to its positions when in 2010, when the rich "Leviathan" field with more than 600 billion m^3 of confirmed reserves at that time was discovered on the shelf of the Levantine Sea (Eastern Mediterranean). Israel became one of the main owners of the field and founders of the international consortium for gas exploration and extraction. Under pressure from Israel, the USA, Greece, and Cyprus then did not include Turkey in the circle of countries benefiting from the gas deal on the "Leviathan", despite Ankara's attempts to gain indirect rights to the gas resources using the so-called "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC) factor. However, this unrecognized by the world puppet regime, is not a subject of international law and, therefore, could not claim part of the Cypriot shelf, as Ankara demanded.

Notably, the "Leviathan" field was discovered shortly after the Israeli Navy's incident with the Turkish vessel "Mavi Marmara" near Gaza in May 2010, a significant event for Turkey. Ankara then initiated a high-profile scandal and severed diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv. Israel could not fail to take advantage of such a situation to, with the support of the United States and jointly with other consortium members, deprive Turkey of the opportunity to receive dividends from the energy projects related to "Leviathan", which started in 2020.

However, the next significant blow to trade and economic interests was aimed at Israel. On September 9, 2023, US President Joe Biden presented the "India–Europe" global trade-energy project at the G20 summit in New Delhi. The central route of this project, developed as a counter to China's *"One Belt, One Road"* program, was the UAE–Saudi Arabia–Jordan–Israel corridor. According to the plan, the route would include combined railways, highways, gas pipelines, oil pipelines, electronic communication cables, and "green energy". Essentially, the project was supposed to turn Israel into a central platform for continental trade along the East–West axis, linking the flow of goods from Europe and Asia, including energy resources from the Persian Gulf. Thus, the gas hub that Turkey aspires to become was supposed to be Israel, securing a monopoly on the transportation of Qatari gas from the "South Pars" and "North Pars" fields. However, less than a month after the presentation of this project, Hamas conducted a large-scale attack on Israel, triggering a new intense war in Gaza. One of the consequences was the curtailment or indefinite postponement of this grand US-Israeli plan.

There are no publicly available facts proving Turkey's involvement in the large-scale Hamas operation. Still, it is clear that Ankara was the main informal beneficiary of the new destructive Palestinian-Israeli war. As a result, Israel lost prospects for building a combined route and including gas flows from the Persian Gulf, once again complicated relations with the Arab world, lost trade through the Red Sea (Suez Canal), and ultimately fell into significant dependence on Turkish goods and supply routes.

Given the above facts of competition for the region's strategic resource base and logistic routes, it can be assumed that the recent events in Syria also fit into the context of Turkish-Israeli economic rivalry. It is now the turn of the US-Israeli tandem to derail Turkey's projects in Syria and Iraq, aimed at securing access to the Persian Gulf, through plans for the federalization of Syria and the revival of the Kurdish issue. Ankara is definitely being deprived of all potential energy supplies (Russian, Iranian, Arab, and Mediterranean gas routes), realizing that access to cheap hydrocarbons and logistical control over them will provide Turkey with the necessary economic base for dominance in the Middle East and Europe. Meanwhile, Israel and the United States have their vision for the future of this vast region, reflected in the strategic concept of the "New Middle East". This concept places "Israeli hegemony" at its core, specifically economic and energy dominance over the aforementioned region.