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## Syria Conflict and Regional Pipeline Geo-strategy

Thomas Costigan

### Abstract

The war in Syria is a mix of various competing agendas both regional and international. One overlooked motive of the war has been the importance of gas pipelines and the strategic power they confer. Iran and Qatar are the biggest gas producers in the region. However, the crucial European gas market can only be accessed in a cost effective way with pipelines. Syria is a vital transit route for the competing pipelines of both Iran and Qatar. Installing a compliant regime in Damascus would be vital for the Qatar pipeline to proceed. On the other hand, keeping the Assad government in power is important to Iran. This paper argues that the competing pipelines of these two nations primarily motivate war.

### Keywords:

Pipeline, hegemony, geo-strategy, gas, Middle East, Iran, Qatar.

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The Syrian war beginning in early 2011, has been portrayed as a popular uprising by the Syrian people against the autocratic regime of Bashar al Assad. However, a closer analysis of this conflict and its motives reveals that there has long been Western interference in domestic Syrian affairs, a prominent example being the CIA led coup of 1949 (Little, 2003:12), (Dostal, 2015 :1). Geographically, Syria is an important transit nation for the competing gas pipelines of Qatar and Iran (Engdahl, 2012:3). Both these nations hold major gas reserves, Iran having the second largest reserves and Qatar having third largest (Index Mundi, 2017). Furthermore, the conflict has exacerbated tensions between the United States and Russia. This demonstrates the international geo strategic nature of the conflict. Russia relies on the naval base at the Syrian port of Tartus for access to the Mediterranean, via the Mediterranean task force (LaGrone, 2017). This paper argues that the war in Syria is primarily a war motivated by the US for the primary purpose of removing the government of Bashar al Assad. Such regime change would disrupt the 'peace pipeline' or 'Islamic pipeline', isolate Iran, weaken Hezbollah and empower Israel (Nuruzzaman, 2016: 3). US State Department documents released by WikiLeaks demonstrate that in December 2006, the US embassy in Syria carried out an analysis of the strength of the Assad government and possible strategies to pressure and overthrow the government (Roebuch, 2006). Furthermore, these communiques reveal the extended efforts of the Obama administration to destabilize the Assad government, even colluding with Al Qaeda in Syria (Sullivan, 2012). Evidence also demonstrate that these efforts represent an intensification of the previous policies of the Bush administration (Mills, 2010). The US had been providing funds to opposition groups inside Syria since 2005 (Mills, 2010), and financed an anti-Assad television network called Barada TV, based in London that began broadcasting anti-government propaganda in 2009 (Mills, 2010). The intention was to mobilize opposition to Assad within Syria.

This paper argues that the 2011-2017 conflict in Syria is another United States led attempt to overthrow another Middle East government, to further its regional energy strategy. It begins by offering a brief history of US intervention in Syria, then analyses the importance of gas pipelines in the region and the opportunities that they offer as geo- strategic levers in the context of the Syrian war. Finally, the paper analyses the international context of the Syrian conflict through the tension between the US and Russia and their regional proxies. The paper concludes by offering an appraisal of the current status of the war and the position of the main participants in the context of pipeline geo strategy.

### **Historical context**

Syria's regional position in the Middle East makes it an important nation that hegemonic powers have historically sought to control. Oil and access to this vital resource has played a central role in the political economy of the region for many decades. There are close parallels with the desire on the part of the US to overthrow President Assad today and the CIA coup of 1949 that overthrew the democratically elected government. In both cases pipelines played an important role. The Trans Arabian pipeline or Tapline was an important factor in the coup that brought Colonel Husni al-Za'im to power. This pipeline took oil from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon. The pipeline was funded by Arabian American oil company, ARAMCO and was a critical oil infrastructure project in the region. The US placed significant pressure on the Syrian government to approve the project. With post-war Western Europe in need of Middle Eastern oil and the Saudi regime in need of oil royalties, the need for a pipeline to carry oil to a port in Lebanon was critical. When the Syrian parliament refused the Saudi pipeline project, due to strong anti-US and anti-Israeli sentiment in the country, the CIA organized a coup that brought Za'im to power. (Little, 2003: 1). After taking power, Za'im moved to grant the Tapline access through Syria (Dostal, 2015: 12-14).

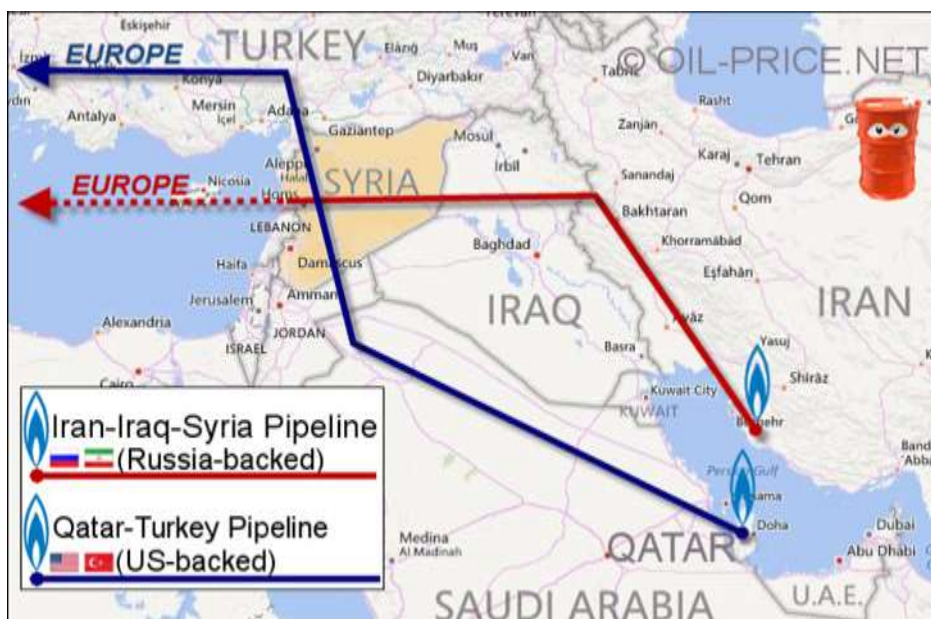
In the early 1950s, the Middle East strategic environment began to change. The US and the Soviet Union competed for influence in the region. The Eisenhower doctrine emphasized the need to roll back Arab nationalism led by Gamel Abdel Nasser, and to mitigate Soviet influence in the region (Jones, 2008: 324). The US maintained its idea of overthrowing the Syrian government. The CIA-led covert actions inside the country, ranging from attempts to assassinate key Syrian figures in the government to recruiting right-wing officers in the army for the purpose of a coup. These efforts were aimed at installing a government more amenable to US demands. In 1956, the CIA's 'Operation Straggle' attempted to recruit 'Syrian moderates' who would compose a potential future government. (Dostal, 2015: 22). However, the Syrian state's intelligence services uncovered and defeated this US operation.

Three important events which occurred in the 1960s and the 1970s have had a lasting impact on the geo-politics of contemporary Syria. The first was the Arab Israeli war of 1967. Syria was a key combatant in this war and its military defeat left an important strategic legacy that still reverberates. The Golan Heights which has been occupied by Israel ever since the 1967 war remains a key source of tension between the two countries. The second factor was the rise to power of Hafez al Assad in 1971 (Leverett, 2005: 8-9). The ideological stance of the Ba'ath party under Hafez made Syria an oppositionist force to western interventionist regimes (Mogannam 2017: 6). The third factor was the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, which led that nation to free itself from western, especially American, dominance. While Syrian and Iranian states have different political trajectories they are both nationalist (Goodarzi, 2015). Their governments continue to exercise national sovereignty which defies the hegemonic agenda of the US in the Middle East (Dostal, 2016: 1). Iran is a major energy producer in the region and possesses some of the world's largest gas fields (EIA, 2014: 1) Like Qatar, Iran

requires a compliant government in Damascus to export its gas to the vital Western European market. Qatar, which is a close US ally, has the capacity to undermine Russian gas exports to Europe (Durden, 2017). If the US could reduce the European dependency on Russian gas it would prove to be a major economic blow to Russia, depriving it of essential revenue from this export market. As the Russian budget is highly dependent on oil and gas revenues, it is particularly sensitive to movements in price (Sabitova & Shavaleyeva, 2015: 427). This would play into US hands to economically weaken Russia and cement US hegemony over Eastern Europe, and possibly Russia itself.

### Iran/Qatar Pipeline

Iran and Qatar hold the Middle East's largest deposits of gas with Iran holding approximately 1.8 billion cubic feet and Qatar 890 billion cubic feet (Index Mundi, 2017). Western Europe is the key destination for these gas exports. (Engdahl, 2016). The most effective way to provide gas to this destination is through pipelines. In geo-strategic terms, pipelines represent extensions of a nation's influence. A pipeline creates a material link between two or more nations and through these pipelines nations become economically interdependent. The gas deposits of both Iran and Qatar are located in the Persian Gulf and are divided into the South Pars and North Dome fields. (International Energy Agency, 2008: 298, 299).



Graphic: Steve Austin, 2014

While Syria is not a major gas producer, the importance of the country lies in its status as an important transit nation for the competing pipelines of Iran and Qatar. It is imperative for both Tehran and Doha to have a government in Damascus that will sanction the construction of their pipeline across Syrian territory. In 2008, President Assad discussed the possibility of Syria becoming an important energy hub through the Four Seas Strategy (Lin, 2010: 11). This Syrian strategy would link the Mediterranean Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea along with Persian Gulf into a critical regional integrated energy hub and transit way for these important energy-producing regions. The strategy would also link the Arab pipeline from Egypt. There was also the potential to integrate Syria into China's Silk Road project (Lin, 2013: 5).

In 2009 the Assad government was approached by the Qatari government with the proposal of building a pipeline across Syrian territory to Europe. The proposal was refused because of the concerns that Syria held over the impact that this pipeline project would have over its close ally Russia, and its current position as the major supplier of gas to Europe. (Dostal, 2016: 18). Further, Iran possesses significant gas reserves in the Middle East region. Pipelines have the potential to offer an important economic lifeline to Iran and defy the efforts by successive US administrations to isolate and weaken the nation. In July 2011 Iran, Iraq and Syria signed a \$10 billion agreement to build a pipeline that would take Iranian gas to Western Europe (Jalilvand, 2013: 8).

There is a history of tension between Saudi Arabia and Qatar surrounding Qatar's independent status. The vast energy resources that Qatar possesses give it a degree of autonomy to pursue its own interests (Aleem, 2017). Qatar has been a significant supporter of terrorist forces attempting to overthrow the Syrian government (Block, 2017); but why would Qatar do this? Commentators who argue that the war is not motivated by competing pipelines must consider why Qatar would go to such extreme lengths to overthrow the Assad government? That Qatar has experienced tension with Saudi Arabia does not negate that it would want to prevent the Iranian pipeline from going ahead. Qatar has become wealthy from exporting gas through its pipelines (Aleem, 2017) and the Iran pipeline is an obvious threat to Qatar's economic policy and source of wealth.

In 2016, Gareth Porter rejected the argument that gas pipelines motivated the war in Syria. In Truthout, Porter stated that the main reason for the war was for the US to preserve its military posture in the Middle East (Porter, 2016). By supporting three Sunni regimes in the region – Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia - Porter argues that the US will preserve its military dominance in the region. However, Porter fails to explain how the government of Bashar al Assad threatens this arrangement, with no evidence offered. The US had had long-standing military cooperation agreements with all three countries in spite of Syria's independent posture in the region. There is no evidence that Assad has ever had ambitions to prevent or disrupt US access to bases in these three countries. While the US must manage its bilateral relations with those three countries, an independent Syria cannot pose any strategic challenge to US hegemony in this regard. If US access to bases were threatened, it would more likely be due to emerging bilateral conflicts between the US and its allies. The recent tension with Turkey and US regarding the 2016 coup attempt against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a good example. He threatened to suspend US access to the NATO base at Incirlik believing that the US had some part in the coup attempt. The Turkish President resents the fact that the US has become home to longtime opponent Fethullah Gulen (Al Jazeera, 2017). US support for the Kurdish YPG in Syria has also caused significant tensions (deGranpe & Snow, 2017).

In 2003, the US removed most of its military assets from Saudi Arabia due to strong anti US sentiment combined with cultural differences and the threat of attacks against Americans there (Otterman, 2005). According to the BBC the US established a drone base in the Saudi desert at some time in 2011 with the intention of searching for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula across the border in Yemen (Corera, 2013). Again, Syrian involvement is not evident or how Syria's independence is threat to this arrangement. The US bilateral relationship with Qatar is more complicated. Qatar is home to the large US air base at Al-Udeid. There has been speculation that the US would move its base from Qatar to another location in the Middle East. In 2017, bilateral relations between Qatar and Iran began to improve, much to the frustration of the US. Russia, Iran and Turkey have been guarantors of

the 2017 Astana talks that aim to find a diplomatic resolution to the Syrian crisis (TRTWorld, 2017). Russia has played an important role in establishing these talks and attempting to normalize relations between Iran and Qatar, and this helps explain Qatar's recent drift towards Iran, following tensions with Saudi Arabia.

### **The War**

In 2009, documents released by WikiLeaks demonstrated that the US was sending millions of dollars to various 'human rights' and 'pro-democracy' groups in Syria (Hunter, 2009). The documents show that Syrian intelligence was aware of these payments, through the interrogation of various activists (Hunter, 2009). By mid-2011, US efforts to overthrow the Assad government increased. US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton claimed that Assad had lost 'legitimacy', due to his government's crackdown on 'activists' inside the country (Epstein, R.J, 2011). On August 24 2011, the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed in Istanbul (GlobalSecurity 2017). This group presented itself as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. They claimed legitimacy on the basis that they were made up of 140 activists, with half inside the country, that they were opposed to Assad and promised transition to a democratic, pluralist society. However, by late 2012 the US had begun to question the effectiveness of this group, given its internal fractures (Boger, 2012). The group has made no statements regarding the Iran or Qatar pipeline.

The Syrian war began in the charged atmosphere of the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 (Haran 2016: 1). This uprising in certain parts of the Arab world, linked to US attempts to overthrow governments in North Africa and the Middle East which were deviating from US hegemonic plans for the region, especially those aimed at isolating Iran (Tarpley, 2011). The Syrian unrest provided the context for US led efforts to overthrow the Assad government. After the overthrow of the Libyan government in 2011, Syria and Iran were the only independent states in the Middle East free of US domination. The uprising and subsequent war in Syria coincided with the unfinished negotiations between Iran, Iraq and Syria to build a gas pipeline to Europe, the 'Peace' pipeline or 'Islamic' pipeline (Durso, 2017). The timing of these two events is important. Street protests that would eventually spiral into war Syria began in March 2011. By May 2011, the Syrian government had deployed the armed forces to confront terrorist groups that were launching attacks against government targets (Global Security 2011). A memorandum of understanding to build the Peace Pipeline was signed in July 2011 (Minin, 2013). By this stage US, the Turkish and Gulf state efforts to overthrow Assad increased. In August 2011 a 'Free Syria Army' was formed, backed by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the CIA, with the intention of provoking government forces (Ryan, 2015). This group was made up in part by Syrian army defectors (Laub & Masters, 2013). The US had used a similar strategy to overthrow the government of Colonel Muammar Gadhafi (O'Brien, Sinclair, Gowan, R, 2011: 14). In November 2012, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was formed by Qatar and the US and was based in Doha (Sofar & Shafroth, 2014: 3). This organization presented itself as the main external opposition force to the government of President Assad (MacFarquahr & Droubinov, 2012). As hesitations within the Obama administration began to subside, lethal aid began flowing to terrorists inside Syria through Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Many of these arms found their way into the arms of al Qaeda linked jihadists. (Sanger, 2012). Furthermore, the US begin training terrorists in Jordan, while experienced terrorists from Libya and elsewhere infiltrated Syria from Turkey.

*French and British special forces trainers are on the ground, assisting the Syrian rebels while the CIA and U.S. Spec Ops are providing communications equipment and intelligence to assist the rebel cause, enabling the fighters to avoid concentrations of Syrian soldiers (Giribaldi, 2011).*

Jordan hosted the region's largest special operations base, the King Abdullad II special operations training center built in 2003 by the US, at a cost of \$99 million (Jamal, 2012: 53). This provided the US with essential infrastructure for training terrorist groups, which they called 'rebels'. The US program of training 'rebels' expanded dramatically by March 2013 to include training of 3,000 officers in the 'Free Syrian Army', in Jordan. The purpose was to create a 'buffer zone' along the Jordanian border, with the alleged goal of protecting civilians. (Ditz, 2013). As the effectiveness of the 'Free Syrian Army' began to wane, due to internal conflicts, the US continued training more rebels in Jordan. These groups have had limited success in fighting government forces. By 2015, there had been several high profile debacles, such as US trained rebels handing over their arms to al Qaeda / al Nusra jihadists (French, 2015). In response to these efforts to oust the Assad government. Hezbollah forces were sent into the Syrian theatre, to assist the beleaguered Syrian state forces and prevent Assad's removal. Estimates of the numbers of Hezbollah forces range between 2,000 and 10,000, and they first saw combat in the Syrian town of al-Qusair (Jenkins, 2014: 7, Choucair, 2016: 5). In conjunction with this effort, Iran increased its commitment to fighting terrorists in Syria by sending more military advisors (Barnes & Levy, 2013: 5).

On 21 August 2013, chemical weapons in the form of sarin gas were used in the East Ghouta region of rural Damascus (Russia Today, 2014). In the Western media, this attack was widely blamed on the Assad government (Bowles, 2013). However, a closer inspection reveals that this is highly unlikely. Richard Lloyd and Theodore Postal of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) published a report raising serious questions about the official explanation provided by the US government of the chemical attack (Lloyd & Postol, 2014: 36). Their report found that the rockets that were allegedly used to fire the gas had a limited range of approximately two kilometers. This would be an insufficient range if they had been fired from Syrian government held territory (Lloyd & Postol, 2014: 2). The report states that accusations made by the Obama administration based on their 'interpretation of the technical intelligence ... cannot possibly be correct', based on intelligence gathered before and after the 21 August attack (Lloyd & Postol, 2014: 11). Investigative reporter Seymour Hersh also raised questions about the credibility of US claims over this attack. Hersh reported that Western intelligence officials were aware that the al Nusra group was developing sarin gas in Spring 2013 (Hersh, 2014). This refutes claims made by the Obama administration that only the Syrian army had access to such weapons. On 4 April 2017, sarin gas was used again, this time at Khan Sheikhoun a Syrian town in terrorist occupied Idlib province (Khan, 2017:2). Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, could produce pictures of dead Syrian children, but no incontrovertible evidence of Syrian government involvement in this chemical attack. (Khan, 2017: 3-4). This incident was used by the Trump administration to launch 59 cruise missiles against a Syrian airbase at Sharyat (Smith, 2017: 3).

In late 2015, the Syrian war took a significant change with Russian forces entering the war on the side of the Syrian government. Russian Aerospace forces began airstrikes on 30 September 2015 against targets in the north of the country and included targets other than Islamic State (IS) forces (Kaim, & Tamminga, 2015: 1-3). The entrance of Russian forces was primarily aimed at ensuring the survival of the government of President Assad. Russia had maintained a small naval base at Tartus since 1971 (Cordesman, 2015: 1), and this task force allows Russia access to the Mediterranean, increasing the relative circumscribed strategic sphere in which Russia can operate. This base also frustrates US attempts to reduce Russian influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East (Escobar, 2015).

## Conclusion

The Syrian war is in fact not a civil war, but a multidimensional war waged by the US and its Gulf allies to prevent the Iran backed pipeline from proceeding. Syria finds itself as a transit nation caught between Qatar and its US backers on one side and Iran on the other. One aspect of the war in Syria is the proxy battle between Sunni Qatar, Saudi Arabia against a Shiite Iran. A key objective of successive US administrations has been the isolation of Iran (Maloney, 2001), and preventing the Iranian pipeline from proceeding is another method of isolating Iran. Turkey as a key transit nation for oil and gas pipelines and aspirant to regional hegemony, has invested significant resources in the Syrian conflict (Escobar, 2012). Western states that are fighting in Syria against Assad including the US, UK, France and Australia have varying levels of interest in Syria. The US as regional hegemon, has more complexities to consider in the form of Russian and Iranian actions. Turkey and its drift away from the US is also of importance. Holding NATO's second largest army, the consequences of Turkish actions via the outcome of the Syrian war are critical. The UK, France and Australia argue they have security interests in Syria, namely in the defeat the Islamic State (Boeglin, 2015). It is instructive to emphasize that both Iran and Syria remain the last two independent states in the region. Both of these countries are supported by Russia, one of the last independent poles of power in the world along with China. If the Syrian government were to be overthrown and a pro US regime established, one likely outcome would be approval for the construction of the Qatari backed pipeline to proceed to Europe, which would reduce Russian gas exports to this important market. This raises an equally important question, that if Russian objections forced the Syrian government to block Qatar's pipeline, why would Syria permit an Iranian pipeline to Europe? Russia may view an Iranian gas pipeline through Syria as a price worth paying to give up some market share in Europe to consolidate an anti US regional formation. Here there is potential for friction between Russia and Iran. Russia is a major gas exporter. Iran aspires to become a major gas exporter with a view to exporting gas to Western Europe via Syria. There is potential for Russia to lose some market share to Iran if this pipeline transpires.

Russia's more assertive actions in Syria are a direct challenge to the decades old hegemonic order that the US has enforced in the region (Stepanova, 2016: 2). This consideration or calculation may be a question of Russian regional geo strategy. Iran and Russia have been growing closer, due to mutual concerns over US policy towards them combined with growing business interests (Kozhanov, 2015: 12). Arms sales in the form of the S-300 surface to air missile system is one example of the growing closeness (McGarry, 2016). Russia has two major strategic concerns in regards to its actions Syria. First, maintaining Russian access to the Mediterranean via the naval base at Tartus, frustrates US attempts at containment. Second, the US has been encircling Russia via NATO and colored revolutions in Eastern Europe. Combined with this, Russia's Eurasian border would be exposed if the Assad government were to fall. After the US- sponsored NATO intervention in Libya and the subsequent humanitarian disaster, Russia is more willing to act on its own in defiance of US demands. Russia as a major military power has the capacity to sustain operations in the region independent of the US. The Syria war brings the US and Russia into direct opposition with one another. The geostrategic stakes are extremely high. At stake are the huge resource reserves the region possesses but possibly more importantly is the strategic positioning in which both nations are currently engaged. Syria and Iran are the last two independent states in the Middle East and thus the final obstacles for comprehensive US hegemony.

Since the 2003 Iraq war, the US has been building a series of military bases in that country, with the US embassy in Baghdad the size of the Vatican (NBCNEWS, 2006). While Washington denies that these bases constitute a permanent presence in the country, the US intention to stay for a long period and exercise influence is evident (Paul & Nahory, 2007:



97). Likewise, the war in Syria may represent an attempt by the US to establish a pro US regime that would then invite the US to establish bases there. Conceivably this would also reduce Iranian and Russian influence in the country and weaken Hezbollah in Lebanon. As Porter (2016) suggests, the war in Syria may be an attempt to mitigate any loss of base access in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar and to sustain US military hegemony in the region. Anderson (2017) argues that the war in Syria is an attempt by the US to extend its hegemony in the Middle East. While this is certainly true, US hegemony in the region is exercised through a complex mix of military bases, diplomatic, financial and economic guarantees and military loans and subsidies. Energy pipelines represent a critical geo-strategic motive of competing powers in the conflict.

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