

The Middle East Energy War Heats Up: Israeli-Turkish Normalization, Turkey's Military Base in Qatar

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After shooting down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M tactical bomber jet operating in Syrian airspace, in early December 2015 the Turkish government sent a heavily armed battalion to the Zilkan military base in Iraq. This move ignited tensions between Ankara and the Iraqi federal government, which renounced it as an act of Turkish aggression.

Within the contours of a resource and energy war, the Turkish military deployment was a move by the [Turkish government to secure its illegal oil trade](#) with the so-called Islamic State (ISIL/ISIS/IS/DAESH).

Turkish Military Base in the Persian Gulf

Weeks after the Turkish military deployment to Zilkan, the Russian military's General Staff reported that it had tracked [11,755 oil tankers](#) and trucks around the town of Zakho on both sides of the Iraqi-Turkish border on December 25, 2015. Despite the claims by the Kurdistan Regional Government that the oil tankers and trucks were the result of a long lineup created by the closure of the Iraqi-Turkish border due to Ankara's military operations against the Kurds in southeast Turkey, the oil tankers and trucks were understood to be part of a re-channeled smuggling route for Syrian oil stolen by the ISIL.



The Turkish government has taken several steps to redirect its energy ties away from Russia and Iran. It is precisely in the context of securing energy reserves that Ahmet Demirok, the Turkish ambassador to Qatar, [announced](#) Ankara's plans to open a military base in Qatar in the Persian Gulf region on December 16, 2015. In an interview with *Reuters* Ambassador Demirok said that the Turkish base was being set up in accordance with the security

agreement signed between Ankara and Doha in 2014 and that the military base would help both Turkey and Qatar jointly “confront common threats” from certain countries, which Demirok declined to name.

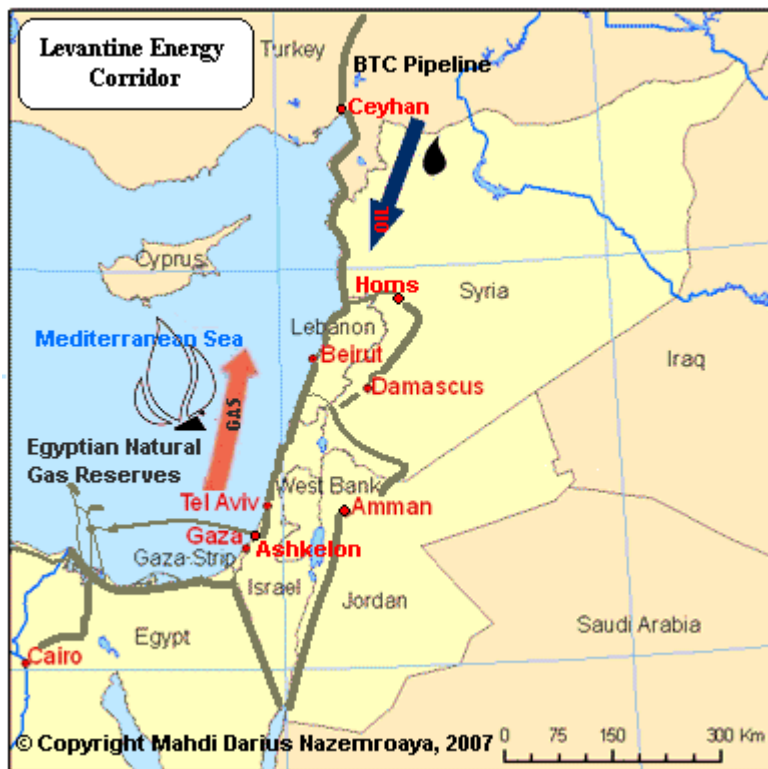
The unnamed countries that Ambassador Demirok was implying could be none other than the duet of Iran and Russia. Moreover, Turkey’s announcement about the establishment of a Turkish military base in Qatar coincided with [an announcement](#) on the following day, December 17, by Salem Mubarak Al-Shafi, the Qatari ambassador to Turkey, that Doha was prepared to provide as much liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Turkey as it needed.

Israel and Turkey Come Together: Eastern Mediterranean Natural Gas

A day after Qatar’s Ambassador Salem Mubarak Al-Shafi announced that Doha would provide Turkey with as much LNG as it needed, on December 18, it was announced that Israel and Turkey had signed a [framework agreement](#) to export Israeli natural gas to Turkey. Although Turkish tensions with Russia, Iran, and Iraq could have hastened the natural gas deal between Ankara and Tel Aviv, the Israeli-Turkish framework agreement for energy trade had been quietly negotiated over for several months by the Israeli and Turkish government.

Analysts and journalists presented the natural gas agreement between Israel and Turkey as a part of a Turkish move to normalize its diplomatic and military ties with Israel as a means of counter-balancing Russia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and their regional partners. These views and claims, however, overlook the fact there have been clear signs that Israel and Turkey have maintained their cooperation, if not close allied relationship, in the economic and military sectors. Both the Turkish and Israeli militaries have even had synchronized movements and operations on the Syrian border.

While Israel has been [re-exporting the smuggled oil that Turkey](#) has been exporting from Syria and Iraq, Tel Aviv has tried to legitimize its appropriation of the Palestinian natural gas reserves off the coast of the Gaza Strip. In parallel, Tel Aviv has exerted its full influence to gain control of the Egyptian natural gas reserves north of the Nile Delta. This is while Israel has tried to lay claim to Lebanese maritime territory holding large deposits of natural gas and courted Cyprus for control of its Mediterranean natural gas reserves.



Contours of a Broader Energy War Emerge

The agreements with Israel and Qatar are a part of a broader energy trade nexus that falls within the contours of an energy war predating recent Russo-Turkish tensions. In fact, both Ambassador Al-Shafi and Ambassador Demirok were only repeating information about deals that were reached between Erdogan and Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani during Erdogan’s visit to Qatar at the time of the Russian military’s press conference announcing his involvement in the ISIL’s oil smuggling. Furthermore, the spatial configuration of the Israeli, Turkish, and Qatar reflected the dimensions of the energy war taking place in the Middle East.

Turkey has done almost everything possible to stop an Iran-Iraq-Syria energy corridor bypassing Turkey from being created. The Turkish military deployment to the Mosul District in Iraq and the creation of a Turkish military base in Qatar are tied to the joint goals of Turkey and Qatar for creating a rival energy corridor running through Turkey to Europe from the Persian Gulf and Iraq. The public demands that Israel give Turkey “unrestricted” access to the Gaza Strip could also be tied to the Palestinian natural gas reserves off of Gaza’s coast.

Furthermore, for years both Israel and Turkey have worked to establish a Levantine energy corridor where Eastern Mediterranean natural gas would be mainly exported northwards towards Turkey and the European Union while oil would be mainly exported southwards towards Israel. The materialization of this corridor has been obstructed mainly by Syria. This is one of the reasons that the Turkish government has pushed for regime change in Damascus.

While there are claims that Turkey is acting independently of the US government, it is highly improbable that no coordination has taken place in regards to the joint US and Turkish objective of regime change in Damascus. The re-direction of Turkish energy trade falls in line with the US objective to cripple the Russian energy sector by obstructing energy trade

between the Russian Federation and other international actors.



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