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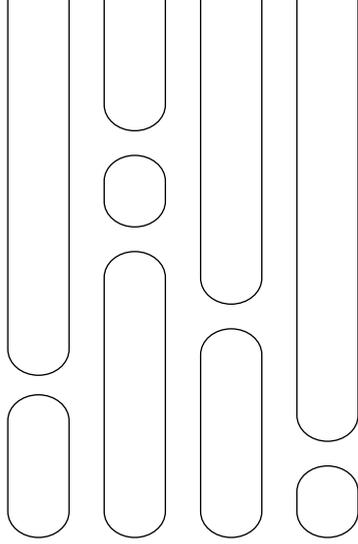
# THE REPERCUSSIONS OF THE ONGOING GLOBAL SHIFTS ON IRANIAN-TURKISH RIVALRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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## Introduction

The world is still reeling from the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic and its variants, which posed the greatest threat to humanity and the most serious threat to the world's economies and peoples since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Meanwhile, major international shifts impacting the essence, tools, and objectives of the foreign policies of both major and midlevel world powers on the one hand continue to transpire. On the other hand, these shifts also impact the levels of competition between regional rivals and converging powers seeking to extend their influence and secure their vital and crucial interests in the regions of geostrategic significance for their international strategies. Additionally, these shifts impact the priorities of the geographical regions on the agendas of major and global powers attempting to wrest control over the existing global order. Moreover, the shifts impact the ongoing regional and international axes and alliances, whether by increasing their strength and clout or through the emergence of new hostile regional and international axes and alliances, as well as impacting the position and standing of converging regional powers within the regional sub-order hierarchy.

Turkey and Iran, two regional powers convergent in strength and engaged in competition in a few geographical areas such as the Middle East, the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, East and West Africa, Central Asia and Latin America, have entered a new critical phase of rivalry mainly in the Middle Eastern fueled by current global shifts, particularly as the Treaty of Lausanne approaches its expiration date in 2023. Both countries rushed to exploit the Middle Eastern region in order to protect and secure benefits regarding vital issues in the region such as natural gas against the backdrop of the energy crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine and the strategic void left following the US decision to withdraw its forces from the region. To achieve their endeavors, the two countries employed several tools, including the use of armed force in areas where their clout intersected, as well as bolstering their alliances by attracting countries from the rest of the competitive geographical areas or offering inducements to countries outside their axis to join them.

Given the nature of the region, this study focuses on analyzing the new stage of competition between the two countries in the Middle Eastern sphere. This is against the backdrop of the Middle East's declining position in the US strategy and rising global powers laying the groundwork for a new global order. The Middle East is an arena for rising powers genuinely testing their positions, especially those that occupy an important position within the current global power hierarchy. Furthermore, some Middle Eastern countries have massive gas reserves, which have become critical

and an important element in global disputes such as those over the severe shortage of gas supplies as a result of Russia's exploitation of gas as a lever in the face of European pressures. Given that Iran possesses massive gas reserves according to global standards and hopes to capitalize on the Europeans' need to find alternatives to Russian gas, this will potentially spark a Turkish-Iranian conflict. Turkey also has regional ambitions to become a hub for exporting Middle Eastern gas to the European countries, depriving Iran of an opportunity to strengthen its trade relations with Europe. This is in addition to the two countries' traditional motivations for competing in this geostrategic sphere, which are related on the one hand to the respective orientations of both governments and on the other to the region's geopolitical position, potential, natural resources, and social and religious makeup.

Accordingly, the study is divided into three main parts. The first part analyzes the features of the current global transformations and power shifts in the current global order. The second part, meanwhile, discusses the visible impact of the shifts on Iranian-Turkish rivalry. The third part sheds light on Turkish-Iranian goals of escalation in the Middle East.

### **Features of the Current Global Shifts**

The global shifts point to crucial changes whose impacts will not be limited to a certain country but will extend to most countries as happened in previous periods that witnessed global shifts. These shifts happened at a certain level or at all levels. Politically, these shifts can include rising global powers' defiance of well-established global rules, the realignment of global powers within new axes that defy the orientations of the global order and the realization by global powers controlling the global order of these shifts, while adopting policies to encircle rising global powers. Economically, these shifts can include the outbreak of crises with extensive impacts on the global economy, such as the ongoing global energy crisis. The powers controlling the global order have been unable to single-handedly face the crisis, which may impact the pace of competition among the regional powers with converging strength when they try to contribute to resolving the crisis. Militarily, these shifts can include the declaration of war by one or some of the rising global powers against a country aligned with the most powerful camp in the world, or their efforts to reduce the military gap with global powers possessing the most powerful and largest military capabilities.

Additionally, these shifts can impact the patterns, tools and objectives of the foreign policies of the most powerful nations, particularly regional powers with expansionist inclinations. They can also include attempts to

make changes in the existing global order, turning it from a mono-polar structure to a bipolar or multipolar one — or the opposite. The following lines provide an explanation of the major features of the current shifts in the global order which could create a new regional and international equation that stiffens competition among regional contestants over regional leadership.

### **Russian Defiance of Well-established International Rules Since the End of the Cold War**

Russia has defied the well-established global rules set by the United States following its victory over the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the declaration of a new global order. (1) This was evident in its hostile policies toward the United States in various regions since the beginning of the 2010s, its efforts to create a global power axis that counterbalances the US-European power axis, and its decision to declare war on the Western camp's strategic allies, such as its decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022. The global order since the early 1990s was established to exclusively assert US dominance over the world, heralding the start of a new era in which Washington is the sole guardian over the international community, the holder of the biggest influence over global political, economic and military decision-making, and the exclusive leader of the world that acts without the need to resort to historical, strategic or traditional allies. The United States also sought to direct UN resolutions to serve its interests while preventing other countries from making decisions that may harm its global dominance or push for a new global order that deprives it of its exclusive global role.

In a defiant way, however, the concluding statement of the Russian-Chinese summit in early February 2022 reiterated that international relations have entered a new era unfavorable for the Western camp.<sup>(2)</sup> Ukraine is a country within the Western camp that is capable of enacting major global shifts as a result of its members' possession of the biggest economic and military capabilities — according to global standards — and the exclusive dominance by one of its members — the United States — over the global order. Members of this camp also control the UN Security Council as three of them are veto-wielding permanent members out of five. This camp also possesses the world's most powerful military alliance, NATO. Russia's decision to invade Ukraine, which the Russians consider a historical backyard, constitutes a breach of international norms set by the United States following the end of the Cold War. It is also a message that it is not only the United States and its historical allies alone who are capable of influencing international affairs, however, as there are rising powers capable of influencing not only

international affairs, but also have the capacity to cause substantial shifts to the global order, turning it into a multipolar order.

Therefore, the Russian intervention in Ukraine will impact regional and international alliances and policies. It will also impact the phases of competition in regional and international spheres. This is because the war in Ukraine triggered a crisis in gas supplies, a crucial issue for both regional and international actors, as a result of the Russian decision to suspend the flow of gas to the European countries that primarily depend on Russian gas — using it as a lever against Europe to dissuade it from providing military assistance to Ukraine. The Russian decision created a huge gap between global demand and supply of natural gas, triggering price hikes that reached record levels. This prompted the European countries to look for alternatives to Russian gas in order to rid themselves of Moscow's lever against them, which stiffened the competition between countries for a share in the European gas market.

### **The US Military Withdrawal From Geostrategic Regions**

The withdrawal of the United States during the administrations of former US President Donald Trump and current President Joe Biden reflects a critical strategic change in the current global shifts. The withdrawal was carried out by a superpower capable of nuancing the security and political equation as well as the balances in the geostrategic regions that concern regional and international actors due to their advantages, including their political and cultural significance, economic resources and geopolitical positions for providing energy routes. The main US withdrawal is from the Middle East and Central Asia, specifically Afghanistan.

The danger of the US military withdrawal lies in the fact that it creates a strategic void for contesting regional powers to fill. As Aristotle put it, politics – like nature – abhors a vacuum. The policy of filling the void was embraced by former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1960s as part of the US dispute with the former Soviet Union in Asia, Africa and the Middle East against the backdrop of the withdrawal of the traditional colonial powers such as France and the UK from these regions. This came as part of the US strategy to fill the void created by the French and British withdrawal to avoid the risks of the growing Communist expansion at the time in the Asian, African and Middle Eastern spheres.

Therefore, the strategic vacuum created by the US withdrawal from the Middle East and Central Asia signaled the start of a new era — not only in the history of these geostrategic regions, but also in the regional security trajectories and the ongoing balance of power game. This strategic vacuum enhanced the vying of disputants such as Turkey and Iran to swiftly move

toward the aforementioned spheres and entrench their strategic foothold. There are several considerations for this, primarily the vital geopolitical position of the areas that witnessed US withdrawals, primarily the Middle East, Afghanistan and South and West Asia. These regions serve as transit points for strategic commodities, vital hubs for international trade movements and critical regions for implementing projects involving energy shipping lines, international commercial ports, and the Chinese Silk Road.<sup>(3)</sup> Therefore, these regions have become the geostrategic spotlight of several countries, transforming them into a venue for the convergence of vital interests of regional and international actors. Hence, maintaining a presence in these regions is critical for carrying out transboundary projects.

### **Power Shifts in the Existing Global Order**

Observers of the hierarchy of global actors — in terms of their overall strength — observe substantial transformations in the power of Russia and China. Not only are Russia and China closing the overall strength gap with the United States which is spearheading the global order, they are extending the scope of their clout to vital spheres serving as backyards and historical spheres of influence for Washington's power, forming security equations and military and economic alliances worldwide hostile to the United States as reflected in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. They are also engaged in fierce competition with the United States to establish a new multipolar world order and shift the global power of balance to the detriment of Washington.

David Singer's Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) to measure the distribution of strength globally between the United States, China and Russia according to several indicators, including overall gross domestic product (GDP), foreign trade volume, gross debt, foreign assistance level, military power, military spending, and world public opinion's acceptance of a country as a global leader, disclosed that the distribution of global strength is as follows: the United States 38.1 percent, China 34.5 percent and Russia 27.2 percent, which means the world is gradually becoming multipolar.<sup>(4)</sup>

These shifts prompted the United States to prepare strategies, change policies, and maximize new military alliances in different geographic regions serving as Lebensraums for its global foes with the aim of containing or encircling them on the one hand and maintaining its exclusive dominance over the global order on the other. As a result, containing regional powers with expansionist inclinations is no longer the top priority of competing global actors, especially the United States. This is

because the Middle East is no longer the top priority in the US strategy, which shifted attention eastwards to encircle China, especially given the improved security situation of Israel through the agreements to normalize relations with some Arab countries. As a result, the international pressures exerted by the United States and rising global actors on expansionist regional powers have waned. The theories of power allocation are based on the belief that disputant regional powers embrace the policy of delaying disputes when the pressures exerted by global powers impact them all. This aims at countering the pressures exerted by global powers — yet this does not mean that the contest among these powers is over. The disputes between them intensify when there are little or no pressures exerted by global powers.

This provides an explanation for the decline in the levels of Iran-Turkey rivalry during the tenure of former US President Donald Trump as a result of the strong US pressures on both countries. Ankara had stood with Tehran against the sanctions imposed on Tehran at the time, leading Turkey to face similar sanctions. This is in contrast to the situation under former US President Barack Obama and current President Joe Biden when US pressures on the two countries decreased because Washington was preoccupied with maintaining its global standing. Against the backdrop of such circumstances, a renewed dispute over regional dominance has erupted between the two countries.

This dispute is fueled by the severe shortage of strategic commodity supplies for the industrialized countries. This exacerbated the global energy crisis by, on the one hand, a massive shortfall in gas supplies versus rising global demand. On the other hand, countries and regions with massive gas reserves have been thrust into the global spotlight. Furthermore, the rates of regional and global conflict have accelerated because of competing interests and rivalry over gas lines and supplies to sustain production and maximize clout. Additionally, the priorities given to certain geographical regions in the US strategy have decreased, including the Middle East, while increasing in others, such as East Asia.

### **The Impact of Global Shifts on the Turkish-Iranian Dispute**

The following provides an overview of the impact of the previously discussed global shifts on the Turkish-Iranian dispute, especially in the Middle East:

#### **Mutual Military Escalation in the Geostrategic Spheres of Influence**

Turkey and Iran have resorted to the use of military force in two strategic arenas — Iraq and Syria — in the Middle East — with the aim of jockeying for clout and filling the strategic void.

### ***The Iraqi Arena***

The Iranian-Turkish dispute in northern Iraq \* is related to several variables — foremost among these is the emergence of the Kurdistan Region's gas file as a new impetus for fomenting disputes between Tehran and Ankara in their spheres of rivalry. This dispute arose after the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Regional Government agreed to provide Turkey and the European countries with gas following talks held between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani in Ankara in February 2022. The deliberations were completed on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum (ADF) in March 2022.

The second variable is related to the intent of the Kurdish Regional Government to export gas to the world. The shuttle tours of its leaders to Ankara, Doha, Abu Dhabi and London with the aim of promoting Kurdish gas — for the region to become a new global gas provider — are proof of this. Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region Masrour Barzani reiterated at the Atlantic Council Global Energy Forum in Dubai on March 28, 2022, that the region looks to contribute to meeting the increasing global demand for energy.<sup>(5)</sup> Barzani's efforts to promote gas come within the context of his strategy to enhance the Kurdistan Region's economic independence and the European need for gas provides a historic opportunity for the region to export its gas to become independent.

The region possesses massive reserves of gas estimated at 5.6 trillion cubic meters.<sup>(6)</sup> According to government statistics, the region produces nearly 14.1 million cubic meters per day<sup>(7)</sup> which places it among the most important gas suppliers in the world. Observers also stated that this amount of gas can meet the demand of several regional and international markets, thus meeting the needs of Turkey, the region's countries, and the European countries for several years — which is of particular concern to the Russians and Iranians.

The third variable is the two countries' use of armed force under various pretexts to conceal the truth about their gas dispute. Iran, for its part, claimed that when it targeted Erbil in March 2022 with 10 Fateh-110 missiles, it hit a Kurdistan Democratic Party position as well as a Mossad hotspot.<sup>(8)</sup> However, Iranian missiles targeted the home of the CEO of the Iraqi Kurdish company KAR Group, which is in charge of the gas pipeline to Turkey.<sup>(9)</sup> Ankara, on the other hand, retaliated against Tehran by sending strong deterrent messages. It announced the launch of a new military

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\*Geographically, the northern Iraqi region includes the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which consists of three Iraqi governorates: Dohuk, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah. This is in addition to the disputed areas of Kirkuk, Sinjar, Makhmour, Daquq, Khanaqin and Tuz Khurmatu in Iraq's Kurdistan Region.

operation codenamed Claw-Lock in mid-April 2022. Furthermore, on May 5, 2022, Turkey bombed Chamchamal under the guise of targeting the dissident PKK. In response, Iranian artillery shelled a number of Kurdish positions in the Sidekan region for the second time on May 11, 2022,<sup>(10)</sup> which demonstrates how the gas dispute is critical for both Turkey and Iran.

When compared to the previous rounds of escalation between Ankara and Tehran to extend their scope of influence in northern Iraq, one can observe that the escalation reflects a critical shift in the essence of the dispute. The escalation has become a critical issue because it is related to vital economic interests for both countries. The escalation is at a very advanced stage in the two countries' conflict. This is because control over Iraqi Kurdish gas will reflect a critical gain and strategic victory for one and a critical loss for the other. Given the Turkish-Iranian competition for regional leadership, success in this dispute will have a decisive impact on one of the two countries' overall strength. Therefore, it is expected that both countries will continue to use armed force. Either side securing this vital interest means risking the other's strength and increasing the likelihood of hostility in all arenas where competition is fierce.

### *The Syrian Arena*

Given the central role of the Iraqi and Syrian arenas in their expansionist strategies, Iran and Turkey have resorted to the use of military force in northern Syria, as they did in northern Iraq. What is more, both arenas are strategically located to facilitate Iran's and Turkey's expansionist projects and dreams of resurrecting their imperial glories. Pro-Iran militias in Syria bombed a Turkish military base west of the Aleppo countryside, which is located within the fourth de-escalation zone. Prior to attacking the Turkish base, the militias deployed military reinforcements in the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations zones. Moreover, the Turkish-controlled line between Afrin and Azaz north of Aleppo was bombed by pro-Hezbollah forces known as the Qassem Soleimani Brigade. In mid-May 2022, forces affiliated with Turkey targeted the Iranian Brigade's positions, killing at least 12 members.<sup>(11)</sup> Furthermore, Turkey escalated militarily, announcing a new military operation in northern Syria in June 2022 under the guise of striking the PKK, which Ankara regards as a terrorist outfit, in the region located in the eastern Euphrates. The main aim of the operation was to establish a -30kilometer-deep buffer zone on Turkey's southern border. Turkey is attempting to prevent the formation of what it regards as a terrorist corridor along its southern border.

The Turkish and Iranian exploitation of global powers being preoccupied with the Ukrainian war as well as the region's priority declining in the US strategy are two decisive factors in Ankara and Tehran moving toward maximizing their clout in the Syrian and Iraqi spheres of influence. Russia's focus on Ukraine instead of Syria, for example, created vast room for Iran and Turkey to extend their clout in Syria, especially in the regions home to strategic commodities such as natural gas.

### **Mutual Economic Competition to Curb Clout**

The Raisi government depends on active economic diplomacy with several countries within various strategic geographic spheres such as Qatar, Oman, Syria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Venezuela. In parallel, Iran has advanced its ties with Russia and China, two global powers having great influence on regional and international affairs. As much as Iran seeks to irrevocably kill any impact of sanctions on its domestic front through its active economic diplomacy, it also seeks to maximize its clout in the aforementioned strategic geographic spheres against Turkey as their interests clash.

On the other side, Turkey has sought to make overtures to Iran's regional rivals. Ankara opened a new chapter in Saudi-Turkish relations, with the visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in April 2022. It was followed by a visit by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to Ankara as part of a shuttle tour that included Cairo and Amman in June 2022 ahead of US President Joe Biden's visit to the region. Iran fears any Saudi-Turkish rapport which could lead to the creation of a new Sunni alliance to counter its project in the Middle East, thus curbing its clout in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. On the other hand, the first half of 2022 witnessed Turkish-Israeli rapprochement following a visit by the Israeli president to Ankara in March 2022. The visit was also accompanied by the revival of the idea of the Leviathan Turkish-Israeli gas pipeline to create alternatives to Russian and Iranian gas. The remarks of Turkey's president in February 2022 that Turkey and Israel could work together to transfer natural gas to Europe<sup>(12)</sup> are evidence of this move to create alternative gas sources.

These shifts in Turkey's positions toward Riyadh and Tel Aviv will not only lay the foundations for the establishment of alternatives to Russian energy but will also benefit Turkish-Kurdish natural gas cooperation and have implications for the future of Iranian gas exports to European clients.

### **Turkish-Iranian Escalation and Its Objectives in the Middle East**

The significance of the Middle East for Turkey and Iran stems not only from the region's vast geographical area, massive population, vast resources,

potential and capabilities but also from its location within a key geopolitical region. Both countries regard this region as a Lebensraum for expansion, maximizing the scope of their strength and clout, and securing regional leadership. Hence, throughout history, the Middle Eastern sphere has served as a strategic hotspot for empires. Taking control of this region has become a symbol of power, reflecting which country is the most powerful. Similarly, withdrawal from the region has become reflective of a country's decline in its global status. The following explains the most important Turkish and Iranian objectives in the Middle East sphere:

### **Turkish Objectives**

Ankara's chief objective of using armed force in Iraq and Syria is to take advantage of the global situation — where global powers are busy handling critical issues— to protect its vital interests in these two countries in particular and the Middle East in general. It seeks to extend its clout and maximize its standing, which will help it to secure the mantle of regional leadership. This comes as the Treaty of Lausanne,<sup>1\*</sup> which placed curbs on Turkish ambitions, is about to expire in 2023. Despite primarily depending on Russian gas — while it could have abandoned Iranian gas and also suspended talks on Kurdish gas through maximizing its share of Russian or Azerbaijani gas — Turkey resorted to armed force to send a message to Iran that Kurdish gas is a vital interest while also seeking to achieve several sub-objectives such as:

#### ***Depriving Iran of Its Pressure Levers***

Even though Iranian gas ranks third after Russian and Azerbaijani gas, Turkey seeks to eliminate the Iranian pressure lever against itself. Tehran is aware of the extent to which its gas exports to Turkey can influence Turkish industrial activities. As part of the Iranian-Turkish competition for regional leadership, Tehran hopes to influence Ankara's position on some critical issues inextricably linked to itself.

#### ***Chipping Away at Iran's Overall Strength***

Turkey aims to chip away at Iran's overall strength through its talks to secure Kurdish gas instead of Iranian gas, while Tehran seeks to enhance

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\* The Treaty of Lausanne was signed on July 24, 1923, following the end of World War I, between Turkey on the one hand and the victorious Allied countries on the other. It ended the so-called Ottoman Empire and the Islamic Caliphate and replaced it with the secular Turkish republic, under which Turkey ceded sovereignty over Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, Libya, Cyprus, Libya and the Levant, which had previously been subject to the Ottoman Empire's sovereignty. The treaty even designated the Bosphorus Strait as an international waterway on which Turkey has no right to collect fees. More information is available at the following link: <https://bit.ly/3Othb9O>.

its competition with Turkey in several spheres of influence. Iranian energy is regarded as one of the future pillars of Tehran's strength, assuming that the sanctions are lifted, and it implements plans to export oil and gas to regional and international clients, including the Europeans.

### ***Enhancing Turkey's Overall Strength***

Turkey also seeks to improve its overall strength and global standing by transforming its soil into a central hub for energy transfer pipelines extending westwards toward Europe in order to achieve the strategic goal of creating a balance that moderates Iranian and Russian control over the supply of energy to Europe. To this end, Turkey intervenes in Syria because it is a link where energy is transferred to Turkey and then to Europe — maximizing its financial revenues and possessing a political lever over the European countries.

### **Iranian Objectives**

Iran opted for escalation using armed force in Iraq — starting with thwarting the new gas projects agreed upon by Iraq, Kurdistan and Turkey. As Iran is crippled by tough sanctions that have caused its economy to deteriorate and have also sparked popular protests, Turkish-Kurdish efforts to provide gas to Turkey and Europe pose a direct threat to Iran's interests as a potential global gas provider. Therefore, Tehran's objectives include the following:

### ***The Ongoing Use of the Iranian Pressure Lever Against Turkey***

The percentage of Iranian gas exported to Turkey is less than what Turkey imports from Russia and Azerbaijan. For example, in 2020, Turkey consumed approximately 46.4 billion cubic meters of natural gas, of which it imported 31.8 billion cubic meters, the majority of which came from Russia (15.6 billion cubic meters), with Azerbaijan coming second with 11.1 billion cubic meters. Turkey imported the least amount from Iran (5.1 billion cubic meters).<sup>(13)</sup> It accounted for only 16 percent of Turkish gas imports in 2020, according to the Statistical Review of World Energy's 2021 report. Yet, such gas exports to Turkey are important for Iran to mitigate the impact of sanctions. Iran is also aware of the importance of Iraqi Kurdish gas as a new player that could deprive it of the gas lever it uses against Turkey to influence Ankara's positions that are inextricably linked to itself. Tehran is aware of the extent to which the suspension of gas supplies to Ankara will impact Turkish industrial activity.

### ***The Desire to Get a Potential Stake in Europe's Gas Market***

Iran is concerned about the potential ramifications of Turkish-Kurdish energy efforts on its future ambitions to increase gas exports not only to Turkey, but also to the European countries, if the sanctions are not lifted. This comes at a time when Iran seeks to capitalize on the current circumstances to strengthen its ties with the West through the export of gas. As a result, Ankara's and Erbil's efforts to transport gas from Iraqi Kurdistan to Turkey and Europe irritated Iran as it provided an alternative to Russian gas other than Iranian gas. Hence, Iran is possibly stripped of a strategic opportunity. Additionally, energy supply contracts are long-term, which poses a barrier to Iran's future ambitions to maximize its gas exports, especially given Ankara's failure to negotiate with Tehran to extend the gas import contract which expires in 2026. This reaffirms Turkey's intention to replace Iranian gas with Kurdish gas.

### ***Maintaining the Interest of Exporting Gas to Iraq***

Turkey's support for increased Kurdish gas production will risk Iran's gas exports to Iraq. Iran uses the gas lever in Iraq to put pressure on successive governments to keep its benefits intact. Iran supplies Iraq with gas to generate electricity. The Iranian share of gas exported to Iraq accounts for nearly one-third of the country's total electricity output of 16,000 megawatts. According to the US Energy Information Administration in 2019, Iran owns 28 percent of Iraqi electricity (23 percent of which comes from gas supplies and 5 percent of the electricity share is imported from Iran,<sup>(14)</sup> which is estimated to be 5,000 megawatts to 6,000 megawatts).<sup>(15)</sup> Therefore, Iran has a powerful leverage against Iraqi governments to pressure them to carry out its schemes in Iraq. Iran is concerned about losing the leverage it possesses over Iraq.

It is worth mentioning here that Iran's militias in Iraq contribute to preventing Baghdad from using associated natural gas to tackle the electricity crisis as an alternative to Iranian gas — because exporting gas to Iraq is a vital interest for Iran. The former Iraqi Minister of Electricity Qasim al-Fahadawi stated in late June 2021 that there are outside actors, referring to Iran, and that the former Minister of Oil Jabbar Alluaibi attempted to exploit the associated natural gas in the Nahran Omar field. However, he faced enormous difficulties and challenges because of certain political parties and external influence. Fahadawi claimed that this field could have replaced 75 percent of Iran's gas at a very low cost.<sup>(16)</sup> World Bank reports in 2020 indicated that Iraq is one of the leading countries in burning gas globally.<sup>(17)</sup> It was ranked second behind Russia in terms of burning associated gas.

It seems, however, that the prospects for exporting Iranian gas to Europe are dim in light of the uncertain sustainability of Iranian gas exports as a result of the sanctions. This prevents major buyers from coming forward to purchase Iranian gas — in addition to the cost and huge time required to extend gas pipelines for thousands of kilometers to reach Europe. Furthermore, despite having the world's second-largest reserves after Russia, the surplus of Iranian gas is insufficient to be transferred to Europe. This is due to Iran's lack of infrastructure to increase production, as well as the sanctions, high domestic consumption<sup>(18)</sup> and rising regional demand for Iranian gas from Kuwait, Oman, and Pakistan. As a result, exporting gas to Europe will not be a priority for Iran for the time being.

Efforts to export Kurdish gas to Turkey and the European countries, on the other hand, also face internal and external challenges. Internal challenges include the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party's opposition to the provision of gas to Turkey and Europe.<sup>(19)</sup> This is the most significant internal impediment to the region becoming a significant player in the global oil market. The PUK governs the region alongside the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and controls one of three Kurdish provinces that possess gas fields. Additionally, the Supreme Federal Court of Iraq issued a decree in mid-February 2022 declaring unconstitutional the law passed in 2007 that granted the Kurdish government powers to independently run the energy sector (gas/oil). The court decision allows the Iraqi central government to sue Ankara if it implements the gas agreement with the Kurdish government, especially given the current crisis between Iraq and Turkey over Turkish water policies in the Euphrates.

As for external challenges, the main one is the Russian-Iranian veto on offering alternatives to Russian and Iranian gas. The Kurdish Regional Government is aware of this. After the military offensive in Erbil ended, Masrour Barzani stated in late March 2022 that “developing the oil and gas sector in the region may not be in Iran's interest.”<sup>(20)</sup> Ankara recognized this as well. A Turkish official reiterated that the timing of the attack on Erbil was very interesting, and that it appears to have been aimed primarily at Iraqi Kurdistan's energy exports and its potential cooperation with Israel.<sup>(21)</sup> The Kurdish plan to export gas threatens Iran's position as a potential natural gas supplier.

## Conclusion

Major global shifts such as Russia's defiance of long-established global rules, the US withdrawal from geostrategic regions and the shift in global balance of power reveal the emergence of a new regional and international reality. In this context, Turkey and Iran are becoming more competitive. This is

because the greater the global order's pressures on rival regional powers, the lower the level of competition or disputes. In contrast, the less pressures the monopolar global order exerts, the greater the intensity of competition or disputes. The recent major global shifts — the decline in the Middle East's importance in the US strategy and the preoccupation of global powers with the Ukrainian conflict — provided Turkey and Iran with an opportunity to intensify their competition and open a new chapter in their conflict to fill the strategic void left by Washington's withdrawal. This is in addition to the emergence of natural gas as a new impetus for competition and conflict to secure a share of Europe's need for alternatives to Russian gas.

The danger of this new chapter in the context of Turkey-Iran competition lies in the fact that it is related to a vital issue for both countries. The two countries can reach a stage in their conflict that ultimately threatens their survival. This could occur because of a military attack on a country's territory or a threat of attack in case of failure to meet enemy demands or when disputes over vital issues become a matter of survival and existence. When a country reaches this critical juncture, there will be no time for holding talks with allies, making compromises with foes or taking offensive measures to warn rivals that they will pay a high price if they continue to pursue their political, economic and military pressures.

It is expected that the levels and spheres of Turkish-Iranian competition will continue to rise — not only in the Middle East, but also in other areas of competition, with qualitative tools tailored to each area. As a result, both sides seek to capitalize on the opportunities created by global shifts to carry out their expansionist and destructive projects. Both Turkey and Iran want to play a bigger role, with Iran hoping to recoup the material and human costs of expanding its clout in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Turkey wishes to maximize the benefits of the new era that awaits when the Treaty of Lausanne, which Turkey signed in 1923, expires on its 100th anniversary. This is especially significant given the lack of an Arab project to counter the Iranian and Turkish projects, with the exception of Saudi Arabia countering their destructive projects. The conflicting vital issue between Turkey and Iran over Turkish talks with Iraqi Kurdistan to provide Ankara with gas deprives Iran of the two gas levers it could use against Baghdad and Ankara, as well as a historic opportunity to strengthen future trade relations with Europe.

Nonetheless, Arab and Gulf leaders appear to be aware of the global shifts that have impacted Arab issues and interests; this is evident in the shuttle tours carried out by Arab leaders and senior officials within the Arab world and beyond. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's tour to Egypt, Jordan and Turkey in June 2022 is one example. The visit was preceded

by a trilateral Egyptian-Jordanian-Bahraini summit in Sharm el-Sheikh to discuss the Arab region's situation considering current global shifts. The current Arab moves are expected to result in policies and strategic axes that limit Iranian and Turkish competition for clout in the Arab region. Otherwise, the Arab world will be trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea.

## Endnotes

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