



ISSUE BRIEF

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# Turkish-Iranian Rapprochement and the Future of European and Asian Energy

APRIL 2014

The recent events in Ukraine have revived the question of European dependence on Russian natural gas. The security of Europe's natural gas supply has been a consistently important issue in Russian-European Union (EU) relations. Russia provided 34 percent of EU gas in 2012, and Russian policies can have a direct impact on EU supplies. After the West-Russian confrontation over Ukraine, a lot has been said about the 'US shale gas revolution' and the possibilities of the United States becoming an energy exporter for future European energy needs. Although US energy independence seems to promise new perspectives for future European energy security, as well as for the balance of power in the Middle East, this is not for this decade. We cannot expect that the European Union would be able to cut off all of its energy relations with Russia, but we can foresee—or at least agree—that the European Union should diversify its natural gas supplies.

Indeed, this is what the European Union was trying to do by exploring different natural gas pipeline projects. The Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), which will transport natural gas from the Shah Deniz II field in Azerbaijan to Western Europe through Turkey, Greece, and Albania, and across the Adriatic Sea to southern Italy, is one of the projects supported by the European Union. At the same time, the European Union is looking for more diverse sources, including countries like Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Cyprus, and Israel.

The recent Turkish-Iranian rapprochement is relevant in this context since, for many years, Turkey and Turkish companies have been interested in transporting Turkmen and Iranian gas via Turkey to Europe. The recent events in Ukraine and concerns about Russian policies, therefore, increase the potential for an Iranian role in supplying gas to Europe.

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The desire of both Iran and Turkey to develop economic relations during the six-month period of international sanctions relief has influenced the recent rapprochement between the two countries. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, Turkey was Iran's most important trading partner in 2012 with \$28.8 billion in trade. In 2013, sanctions reduced trade to \$14.5 billion, dealing a hard blow to the Turkish economy.<sup>1</sup> This Turkish-Iranian trade has reduced the efficacy of Western sanctions by significantly reducing the pressure on Iran.

Turkish-Iranian trade relations are largely based on energy. In 2011, Iran met 62 percent of Turkey's need for oil and 19 percent of its need for gas. As US-led sanctions required a decrease in Turkey's import of Iranian energy, in 2012, Iran provided 39 percent of

1 See <http://www.tuik.gov.tr/UstMenu.do?metod=temelist>.

Turkey's oil and 18 percent of Turkey's gas imports. Iran is Turkey's second-largest natural gas supplier after Russia, which met 57 percent of Turkey's need for gas in 2012. Turkey's demand for natural gas sees a substantial seasonal increase during the winter, and overall demand is growing significantly. Both of these factors mean that Turkey relies on increased imports to meet its energy needs, and the prospect of losing Iranian imports would be devastating. Even if Turkey is able to shift to importing more from Russia, this only increases Turkey's dependence on Russia, potentially damaging Turkey's leverage to demand lower prices. Just as importing Iranian natural gas is important for Turkey, exporting natural gas to Turkey is also critical for Iran since approximately 90 percent of Iran's natural gas exports go to Turkey.<sup>2</sup>

Given its dependence on Iranian gas imports, Turkey is also concerned about the price of Iranian gas. Turkey's Petroleum Pipeline Corporation (BOTAŞ) filed an arbitration case against Iran in March 2012 in Geneva. Turkey demanded a retroactive return to formerly discounted prices because Iran's natural gas prices were relatively high on the international market and because Iran had exported poor quality gas.<sup>3</sup> The trial is expected to last until late 2014. As this would suggest, in the most recent meetings in Tehran in late January 2014, the most important question was natural gas purchases. While Ankara wants a discount, Iran says it will only accept a discount if Turkey doubles its purchase volume. Although Turkey does want more gas, the two sides have been unable to set a mutually agreeable price.<sup>4</sup>

While the price of Turkey's gas imports is protected as a "state secret," one media source citing leaked documents estimated Azerbaijani gas cost \$330 per cubic meter, Russian gas could be bought at \$400 per cubic meter, and Iranian gas cost \$505 per cubic meter. Therefore, compared to the average price paid to her other suppliers, Turkey is paying about 20 percent extra for Iranian gas.<sup>5</sup> In early 2012, when Turkey opened an arbitration case against Iran, however, it is likely Turkey was only paying around \$5 more than what Ankara paid for Russian gas, about \$423 per cubic

meter.<sup>6</sup> As some noted, the arbitration case may have reflected Ankara's political, more than commercial, concerns with Tehran.<sup>7</sup>

During Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's January 2014 visit to Turkey, both countries' foreign ministers stated they expected \$30 billion trade volume in 2015 and claimed that it was an attainable goal.<sup>8</sup> Zarif also stated that economic relations are the backbone of closer relations between the two countries.

In light of Turkey and Europe's long-term needs for natural gas, the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement sparks ideas for a variety of projects that have been debated for many years.

For the first time in July 2007, Turkey and Iran signed a "Memorandum of Understanding," which stated Iranian and Turkmen natural gas would be transported via a new pipeline through Turkey, and Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) would invest in South Pars natural gas fields in Iran. On November 17, 2008, during Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Tehran, this agreement was updated and expanded.<sup>9</sup> At that time the Iranian State Company and TPAO signed a preliminary agreement. Later, on November 27, 2009, İbrahim Radafzoun of the Iran Petroleum Ministry said that Turkey was ready to invest \$3.5-\$4 billion in South Pars.<sup>10</sup> By July 2010 however, Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yıldız said that they had given up on the South Pars Project because the "desired agreement was not provided."<sup>11</sup> This came in light of claims that it was the wrong time for a NATO ally to be investing in Iranian energy, the US Congress's renewal of sanctions against companies investing for than \$20 million in Iranian gas and oil, and US leaders' serious warnings issued to Turkey.

Still, Turkey-Iran-Europe pipeline projects continued to develop. Iranian Oil Minister Mesut Mir Kazimi announced the signing of an agreement for a €1 billion pipeline in a July 2010 visit to Turkey. In amendments issued by the government, it was specified that BOTAŞ did not sign the agreement and that there were no

2 See [http://www.eia.gov/analysis/requests/ngexports\\_iran/pdf/full.pdf](http://www.eia.gov/analysis/requests/ngexports_iran/pdf/full.pdf).

3 Mehmet Nayır, "İran'la gaz pazarlığı," *Sabah*, February 18, 2014, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Ekonomi/2014/02/18/iranla-gaz-pazarligi>.

4 "Turkey may double Iran gas purchase if price issue solved: Energy minister," *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 30, 2014, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-may-double-iran-gas-purchase-if-price-issue-solved-energy-minister.aspx?pageID=238&nID=61798&NewsCatID=348>.

5 Olgu Okumus, "Why is Turkey buying more gas than it needs from Iran?," *Al-Monitor*, February 28, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/turkey-iran-gas-import-consumption-erdogan-price.html>.

6 Alex Jackson, "Untangling Turkey's Gas Pricing Knot," *Natural Gas Europe*, April 11, 2012, <http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/high-turkish-energy-imports-iran-russia>.

7 Ibid.

8 See <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Ekonomi/2014/01/29/turkiyeiran-arasinda-cok-kritik-anlasma>.

9 "Erdoğan İran'ın dini lideri Hamaney'le buluştu," *CNN Turk*, October 29, 2009, <http://www.cnntrk.com/2009/dunya/10/29/erdogan.iranin.dini.lideri.hamaneyle.bulustu/549665.0/>.

10 "Iran: Turkey to invest \$4billion in South Pars gas field development," *Energypedia News*, October 27, 2009, <http://www.energy-pedia.com/news/iran/turkey-to-invest-usd4billion-in-south-pars-gas-field-development>.

11 "İran'la Güney Pars defteri kapandı," *Sabah*, July 24, 2010, [http://www.sabah.com.tr/Ekonomi/2010/07/24/iranla\\_guney\\_pars\\_defteri\\_kapandi](http://www.sabah.com.tr/Ekonomi/2010/07/24/iranla_guney_pars_defteri_kapandi).

barriers to private companies signing such agreements. The agreement was signed by Som Petrol in Turkey. Som Petrol announced that for the Iran-Europe pipeline it would work with the National Iranian Gas Export Company to build a 660-kilometer-long pipeline from Iran to Turkey.<sup>12</sup>

Som Petrol's subsidiary, Turang Transit, applied to build the 1,720 kilometer portion of the pipeline that would go through Turkey. The pipeline would run from Bazargan in Iran to Greece and Germany, by way of Turkey. In November 2010, one month after Erdoğan's visit to Iran, Turkey's petroleum administration granted a license to Turang Transit to operate the pipeline for thirty years.<sup>13</sup>

In an August 2010 decision, the Turkish General Directorate of Petroleum Affairs announced, "Turang Transit...will construct the 1720 kilometer portion of the pipeline which is within our country's borders.... Unless Iran notifies Turkish authorities of its approval of the transit transport of Turkmen gas from Iran to Turkish soil no operations related the project will be launched."<sup>14</sup>

According to the December 2013 Subsidy Document List published in the January 31, 2014 Official Gazette of the Republic of Turkey, Turang Transit received the second-largest subsidy in Turkish history with a 11.5 billion Turkish lira investment for natural gas pipeline transportation services.<sup>15</sup>

Yıldız said they discussed projects related to Iranian gas being transported through Turkey to Europe during the Turkish delegation's January 2014 visit to Tehran, projects that Turkey looked upon favorably.<sup>16</sup>

However, other questions remain. It seems that Som Petrol, for example, was put on the state of New Jersey's black list for trade with Iran.<sup>17</sup> Discussion of Som Petrol

and trade with Iran in the press is a continuing headache for the United States, even more so considering the pipeline is believed to be currently under construction.

The Turkish Energy Ministry maintains that the transport of Turkmen gas transit through Turkey is an unchanging condition for the Iranian gas transport to Europe via Turkey. One can argue that it is not easy for Iran to accept this condition. Indeed, while Iran is classified as a medium-size exporter, Iran also imports natural gas through pipelines from Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Iran imports Turkmenistan's relatively cheap gas and sells its gas to other countries like Turkey for a higher price.

Iran also does not want to compete with Turkmenistan, a state that boasts the second- largest oil field and the fourth-largest natural gas reserves in the world, and whose largest customers are China, Russia, and Iran itself.<sup>18</sup> In 2011, Iran received approximately 30 percent of Turkmenistan's gas exports, which helps meet northern Iran's industrial needs and the spikes in energy demand during the winter.<sup>19</sup> According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Iran has some flexibility with Turkmen imports and could replace imports with domestic gas, if necessary.<sup>20</sup> However, Iran's import of gas frees up Iranian gas for export to other countries, including Turkey.

Furthermore, Iran has increased the import of natural gas from Turkmenistan in the latter part of 2013, since the price of Turkmen gas has remained stable, despite market pressures that would normally raise the price.<sup>21</sup> According to the latest news, which remains unverifiable, Iran agreed to the transit passage of Turkmen gas through Iran to Turkey with the condition that the gas would only be consumed within Turkey.<sup>22</sup> If true, this confirms that Iran is trying to avoid possible future competition with Turkmenistan for European markets.

While Iran is the fourth-largest producer of natural gas, globally it accounts for less than 1 percent of natural

12 "Iran and Turkey sign pipeline deal," Al Jazeera, July 23, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.com/business/2010/07/201072314455840549.html>; Erdiç Çelikkan, "11.5 milyar TL'lik yatırıma teşvik aldı," *Hürriyet*, February 1, 2014, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/25711328.asp>.

13 See <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/main.aspx?home=http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/ilanlar/eskiilanlar/2010/11/20101123.htm&main=http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/ilanlar/eskiilanlar/2010/11/20101123-4.htm>.

14 Ibid.

15 See [http://www.google.com.tr/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CDEQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.resmigazete.gov.tr%2Feskiler%2F2014%2F01%2F20140131-9.xls&ei=ltpLU4f0M4HnygPov4CYAQ&usg=AFQjCNGIZFxs2lCfG\\_B\\_axObLMN8f4e6Sg](http://www.google.com.tr/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CDEQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.resmigazete.gov.tr%2Feskiler%2F2014%2F01%2F20140131-9.xls&ei=ltpLU4f0M4HnygPov4CYAQ&usg=AFQjCNGIZFxs2lCfG_B_axObLMN8f4e6Sg).

16 Selçuk Kapuci, "Yıldız: İran'la tahkim süreci devam ediyor," *Cihan Haber*, February 17, 2014, [http://www.cihan.com.tr/news/Yildiz-Iran-ile-tahkim-sureci-devam-ediyor\\_2608-CHMTM2MjYwOC8z](http://www.cihan.com.tr/news/Yildiz-Iran-ile-tahkim-sureci-devam-ediyor_2608-CHMTM2MjYwOC8z).

17 Tolga Tanış, "Türkiye kaybediyor, Som Petrol Kazanıyor," *Hürriyet*, February 23, 2014, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/25872591.asp>.

18 "Europe regards Turkmenistan as prospective gas supplier," *Cihan*, February 27, 2014, [http://en.cihan.com.tr/news/Europe-regards-Turkmenistan-as-prospective-gas-supplier\\_8657-CHMTM20DY1Ny8z](http://en.cihan.com.tr/news/Europe-regards-Turkmenistan-as-prospective-gas-supplier_8657-CHMTM20DY1Ny8z).

19 *Natural Gas Exports from Iran*, U.S. Energy Information Administration, October 12, 2013, [http://www.eia.gov/analysis/requests/ngexports\\_iran/pdf/full.pdf](http://www.eia.gov/analysis/requests/ngexports_iran/pdf/full.pdf).

20 Ibid.

21 "Iran scales up Turkmen gas imports at fixed price," *Tehran Times*, vol. 11850, November 10, 2013, <http://tehrantimes.com/economy-and-business/112049-iran-scales-up-turkmen-gas-imports-at-fixed-price>.

22 İsmail Altunsoy, "İran'a Boru hattı Kıyağı," *Zaman*, March 4, 2014, [http://www.zaman.com.tr/ekonomi\\_irana-boru-hatti-kiyagi\\_2203017.html](http://www.zaman.com.tr/ekonomi_irana-boru-hatti-kiyagi_2203017.html).

gas trade.<sup>23</sup> Even if South Pars and other potential projects materialized, the growing domestic demand limits Iran's long-term capability to increase its role as an exporter.<sup>24</sup> Sanctions have also had a destructive role in Iran's oil and natural gas industry, leading to the withdrawal of many companies, the all-but-disappearance of foreign investment, and increasing roadblocks to buying technical equipment and technology. Thus, to be able to export its gas to Europe, Iran would need to attract foreign investment in natural gas exploration and production.

It is also important to note that, while it is still difficult to predict when the European Union will be able to accept Iranian gas, there are not the same concerns over Turkmen gas.

In November 2013, the head of the EU mission in Turkmenistan said that negotiations are underway for the pipeline through the Caspian Sea, which would play a key part in Europe's larger plans to diversify energy sources and reduce dependence on Russian gas. Connecting Turkmenistan to European markets would also reduce Turkmenistan's dependence on Russia as an importer. While Europe, Turkey, and Turkmenistan would benefit from the project, proposals clearly harm Russia's interests.

In a February 2014 meeting in Ashgabat, the Secretary of the Energy Charter emphasized that Europe is looking to Turkmenistan as a new, stable supplier of natural gas.<sup>25</sup> In May 2013, Turkish President Abdullah Gül even signed an agreement with the Turkmen president that explicitly aimed to bring Turkmen energy to European markets.<sup>26</sup>

Both Iran and Russia are interjecting in the proposed project to transport Turkmen gas to Azerbaijan through the Caspian Sea and on to Turkey—for example, via TAP and TANAP. And both Russia and Iran cite the Caspian Sea's perpetually disputed status and unresolved borders as significant obstacles to the pipeline that would cut both Iran and Russia out of energy deals.<sup>27</sup> The two countries have insisted that transnational projects in the Caspian Sea require consent from all five littoral states, claims that

countries such as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan reject.<sup>28</sup>

One of the biggest issues with this proposal is the potential competition between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan over European markets. There are also disagreements between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan over maritime borders. While Turkey has tried to facilitate a solution, it has been unable to achieve reconciliation. In the same way, Turkey has been unable to eliminate disagreements with Iran and Russia over the project. With several projects and contradictory announcements, the Iranian Ambassador Alireza Bikdeli's comments can shed some light on Turkish-Iranian energy negotiations. In a June 2013 interview with a Turkish newspaper, the ambassador opposed the idea of delivering Turkmen gas to Turkey through the Caspian Sea, adding that, "if Turkey wants to do serious business, it should do it with Iran. Until today, there has not been any example of the transfer of natural gas through the Caspian Sea. There are some problems in the Caspian Sea region, and these problems prevent the occurrence of business there. Turkey is also discussing the issue with us. If you want to do serious business, this business should be done through Iran."<sup>29</sup>

From this announcement it is clear that Iran is not opposed to Turkmen gas going through Turkey to Europe by way of Iran but that Iran is opposed to Turkmen gas going through the Caspian to Azerbaijan and then Europe. Therefore, it is likely that Turkey will be tying the Iran-Turkey-Europe Gas Pipeline Project to Iran's approval of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline. Actually, Turkey wants to see the realization of all these projects and to become a part of the transit routes. It means that Turkey wants to bring Turkmen gas through both Iran and Azerbaijan.

On the other hand, an agreement between Iran and Azerbaijan is also problematic for political reasons: Iran's treatment of its Azeri population; Iran's alliance with Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh War, and Azerbaijan's 2012 defense agreement with Israel all strain relations between the two countries.<sup>30</sup> Turkey would like to help improve Iranian-Azerbaijani relations. The three foreign ministers met in Van on March 14, 2014. Only time will tell if these meetings will bring progress on these energy questions. For the

23 *Iran Analysis*, March 28, 2013, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=ir>.

24 *Natural Gas Exports from Iran*.

25 See [http://en.cihan.com.tr/news/Europe-regards-Turkmenistan-as-prospective-gas-supplier\\_8657-CHMTM20DY1Ny8z](http://en.cihan.com.tr/news/Europe-regards-Turkmenistan-as-prospective-gas-supplier_8657-CHMTM20DY1Ny8z).

26 Alex Jackson, "Trans-Caspian Pipeline not easy project to complete," *Azernews*, December 2, 2013, <http://www.azernews.az/analysis/62106.html>.

27 "Turkmenistan: EU Maintains Hope for Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline—Report," November 20, 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67776>.

28 Jackson, "Trans-Caspian Pipeline not easy project to complete."

29 Sinem Cengiz, "Iranian envoy opposes Turkmen gas delivery to Turkey via Caspian Sea," *Today's Zaman*, June 21, 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-318888-iranian-envoy-opposes-turkmen-gas-delivery-to-turkey-via-caspian-sea.html>.

30 Caroline Farris, "Geopolitics Trump Religion in Iran-Azerbaijan Relations," *Diplomat*, August 7, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/08/geopolitics-trump-religion-in-iran-azerbaijan-relations/>.

Trans-Caspian Gas pipeline to succeed, US support is needed, just as it was for the realization of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.

Another important point for Turkey and Iran's long-term energy relations is the potential to use Ceyhan port in lieu of the Strait of Hormuz for energy transport from Iraq to Asia, namely replacing Iran with Turkey as a major point of transport or as an alternative route. In 2012, after Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in case of an oil embargo, Iraqi Government Spokesperson Ali el Debbağ announced that steps toward developing Ceyhan had been taken.<sup>31</sup> It seems that work continues toward increasing Ceyhan's capacity. Furthermore, in March 2014, Yıldız said that "Turkey will deliver all Iraqi oil to the world markets" by "increasing Kerkük-Yumurtalık crude oil pipeline capacity from 30 percent to 100 percent."<sup>32</sup> In the long term this is very important not only for the Turkey-Iran balance in Iraq but also for US strategic interests in the region, including the US rebalancing policy in the Middle East.

We should not forget that China, with which the United States is attempting to achieve a strategic agreement, has a growing dependence on Middle Eastern oil. In 2011, 60 percent of Chinese imports were from the Middle East.<sup>33</sup> China is now the largest foreign investor in Iraqi oil, and Baghdad is second only to Saudi Arabia in supplying oil to Beijing.<sup>34</sup> For the United States, energy security in the Middle East—including the security of energy transport to Asia—has important strategic implications. Therefore, looking ahead to the United States' gradual disengagement from the Middle East, China may have a chance to increase its influence in the region and ensure its energy security. Hence, Turkey's potential role in the region in the next decade, as a 'balancing power' against an Iran integrated into the international community, should also be evaluated in terms of energy security.

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31 See <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Ekonomi/2012/03/19/hurmuz-bogazinini-alternatifi-ceyhan-olacak>.

32 "Basra petrolü Yumurtalık'a akacak," *Sabah*, March 10, 2014, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Ekonomi/2014/03/10/basra-petrolu-yumurtalika-akacak>.

33 Sotiris Serbos, "Injecting the Iranian Factor in US-Turkish Relations: A New Player in Town?," *UNISCI Discussions Papers*, n. 34, January 2014, p. 25.

34 *Ibid.*

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