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Turkish Attitude towards US-Iran Escalation

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Tarek Diab*

There has been a fierce conflict between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the international and regional scene since May 2018, when President Donald Trump announced US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, known commonly as the Iran nuclear deal or Iran deal, an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program reached in Vienna on July 14, 2015, between Iran, the P5+1 (US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany), and the European Union. After that, the United States moved against Iran's economic benefits from the nuclear deal by re-imposing economic sanctions on Tehran through two main phases:

1- The US administration in August and November 2018 targeted Iran's oil exports with the aim of bringing them to zero (denying the government its main source of revenue), classified Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in April 2019 as a terrorist organization, and mobilized naval and air forces in the Arab Gulf region in May 2019, in implementation of the "maximum pressure" strategy announced by the US administration against Iran[1].

2- On 22 April 2019, Trump decided to end exemptions from sanctions for eight countries (China, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, Italy and Greece) that were still buying oil from Iran, as of May. "We're going to zero—going to zero across the board," said US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during an interview on 22 April. Accordingly, any country that violates the US decision will have to face US sanctions[2] as of May 2.

While the first phase of sanctions on the Iranian oil sector led to a decline in oil exports from 2.4 barrels[3] per day to 1.3 million barrels, by about 53%, the second phase aims at bringing Iran's oil exports to zero. Therefore, any violation of the US decision by any of the eight countries will be seen by Trump as a move to weaken the effectiveness of sanctions and blockade imposed by the US

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1 على العبد الله، أميركا – إيران. ضرب تحت الحزام، العربي الجديد، 2019/5/15، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/20)

2 واشنطن تلغي الإعفاءات من عقوبات إيران. وعقوبات تنتظر 8 دول، سكاي نيوز عربية، 2019/4/22، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/20)

3 تصفير نفط إيران خلال ساعات، العربية نت، 2019/5/2، (تاريخ الدخول: 2019/5/20)

administration on Iran, which will make him reluctant to impose strong sanctions on violating countries.

The Turkish response to the decision came on a gradual basis: First, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu on 22 April considered pushing for buying oil from other countries besides Iran as "going too far", stressing that his country opposes such decision[4]. Then, on 2 May, Çavuşoğlu announced that his country cannot diversify its oil imports immediately. "It does not seem possible for us to diversify the sources of the oil we import in a short time," the Turkish foreign minister told a news conference, adding, "We have to renew the technology of our refineries when we buy oil from third countries. That would mean the refineries remaining shut for some time[5]". That is, Turkey could be committed to the decision, but it needs more time to modernize its refineries, so that they could process oil that differs in nature from Iranian oil. Finally, in a decisive statement, a senior Turkish official on 22 May confirmed that Turkey stopped purchasing Iranian oil as of May[6].

In this context, the paper seeks to answer two main questions:

- The first question is related to the tracks of the US-Iran escalation and its implications on Turkey, and Turkish attitude towards it;

- The second question focuses on the background of Turkey's commitment to the US decision to zero Iranian oil exports and the Turkish profit and loss accounts resulting from such a decision.

In conclusion, the paper suggests some recommendations and options on how Turkey can address such crisis to avoid major losses.

First: Escalation Tracks and Turkish Calculations

- What are the likely paths of the US-Iran escalation?
- Is the Middle East region likely to witness a comprehensive or even limited war?

- Will it remain on the brink of a likely war?

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[4] هكذا علقت تركيا على قرار ترامب بشأن النفط الإيراني، عربي21، 2019/4/22 (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/20)
[5] تركيا: لا يمكننا التخلي سريعاً عن النفط الإيراني، الشرق الأوسط، 2019/5/3، (تاريخ الدخول: 2019/5/20)
[6] تركيا التزمت بالعقوبات الأمريكية على النفط الإيراني، الديلي صباح، 2019/5/23، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/6/8)

- Will there be a state of de-escalation after the two parties return to negotiation with the aim of reaching a new nuclear deal?
- What is Turkey's best track, based on its own calculations of such a conflict?

Turkish Calculations

Turkey is not in favor of launching a war or any kind of military escalation against Iran; first, because the collapse of the central government in Iran poses two very serious threats to Turkey: on the one hand, it will lead to large waves of refugee outflows from Iran into Turkey, which will deepen its economic crisis; on the other hand, it will give the Kurds of Iran an opportunity to demand and strive for establishment of a self-rule zone, which encourages and revives the hopes of Kurds in Turkey and Syria again, after the heavy losses they have suffered at the hands of the Turkish forces.

Second, because of Turkey's NATO membership, Turkey is prompted to support the American position, even at the minimum levels. This will eliminate Turkey’s policy of maintaining balanced relations in its foreign policy towards regional and international actors; which will accordingly pose security threats to Turkey, both from Iran through a likely targeting of the Turkish interior, and in the Syrian arena on the security and military levels.

Escalation Tracks

This paper excludes the options of an all-out war, a blitzkrieg war, or even a limited war, taking this into account the likeliness of any misinterpretation of calculations on the part of one of the two sides during their mutual escalation. In other words, both sides do not essentially intend to go to war up to now, but they do not rule out this option under the current escalation.

What makes the track of excluding war most likely?

First, we may suggest that there are four main objectives of the recent American military buildup in the Gulf region:

1- The military buildup comes in the context of the psychological war; as a deterrence tool rather than a tool of war, to tighten pressures imposed by Washington on Tehran, along with the economic sanctions. The ultimate purpose of such military buildup is to force Iran to engage in negotiations for reaching a new nuclear deal under US terms.

2- The recent military buildup comes within the framework of a pre-emptive American step, in anticipation of Iran's likely threats to the interests of the United States and its allies in the region, in light of the siege imposed on the Islamic Republic.

3- This escalation can be read in the context of the US peace plan known as the deal of the century[7]. In this context, Trump seeks to exploit the escalation with Iran and the military buildup in the Gulf to create a justifiable Israeli-Arab solidarity - especially with Arab Gulf countries - in the face of Iran, exploiting this solidarity and military buildup to support and push forward his 'deal of the century'.

4- With the recent intensification of conflict in the Middle East, there has been a state of dissatisfaction in the American defense circles, because of the inefficiency and inadequacy of the strategic US military deployment in the Middle East region, especially in light of the difficult challenges facing the US presence in the region, and the fact that the international campaign against ISIS has revealed such problems[8]. Therefore, this escalation is an opportunity for the US administration and the Pentagon to address this gap, which explains the consensus between the two American institutions on the recent military buildup in the Gulf region.

Second, the structure of American forces in the Middle East, even after the entry of the USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72) aircraft carrier and the USS Arlington (LPD-24) destroyer, is not enough to launch a disciplinary air campaign against Iran. According to assessments carried out by US strategic think tanks, most of which are affiliated to the Pentagon, the United States needs about 450 attack aircraft in order to strike various targets inside Iran, for prompting Tehran to sit on the negotiation table with the current US administration under new terms. Currently, the number of US attack bombers in the region is only half that number. Despite previous plans by the Israeli Air Force and the United States to strike against Iran, since the time of former US President George W. Bush, they have all failed because of geographical and operational factors. In addition, the United States needs double the

[7] محمد خيري، صفقة القرن بعد رمضان، تي آر تي عربي، 2019/4/18، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/20)

[8] محمد عمر، أنس القصاص: من المبكر الحديث عن حرب أمريكية في الخليج (حوار)، الدستور، 2019/5/16، (تاريخ الدخول: 2019/5/20)

forces that participated in the overthrow of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, in order to repeat the same experience with Iran[9].

Third, both the American and Iranian sides have declared that there they have no desire or intention to go to war. Trump denied the existence of a military confrontation plan with Iran; US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stressed that his country does not want war with Iran, but presses on Tehran to prompt it to change its policies[10]. As for Iran, Majlis (parliament) National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Chairman Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh called for an Iranian-American dialogue in Iraq or Qatar[11]. More recently, on 7 June, Iran announced it objects any talks beyond the nuclear deal[12], which is considered an indirect Iranian acceptance of the principle of negotiation if it is limited to its nuclear program without its regional policy, taking into consideration that Tehran had formerly rejected the principle of negotiation on its nuclear program.

Fourth, about 40% of the world's exports of oil and its derivatives pass through the Strait of Hormuz, including 88% of Saudi Arabia's oil exports, 98% of Iraq's oil exports, 99% of the UAE oil exports, and all the oil exports of Iran, Kuwait and Qatar[13]. It is also estimated that any tension that may lead to the closure of Hormuz Strait would raise the price of a barrel of oil to $ 100[14].

Ultimately, based on the size and nature of the recent American military mobilization and its objectives, the United States does not seem to have come for war, and if it happens, it will be just a reaction to provocation from the other side. All these factors make the outbreak of war in the Gulf area unlikely, in favor of the continued policy of brinkmanship between the two parties for a period that may continue for some time. But while the war option of war is ruled out, it can also be suggested as a likely option, both in the form of a blitzkrieg war with limited strikes, or even as a full-scale war,

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9 Ibid

10 الثلاثة المتحمسون لضرب إيران، الجزيرة نت، 2019/5/15، (تاريخ الدخول: 2019/5/20)

11 مسؤول إيراني يدعو لحوار مع أميركا في قطر أو العراق، الجزيرة نت، 2019/5/17، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/21)

12 Parisa Hafezi, Iran rejects French call for wider talks beyond nuclear deal, 7/6/2019, (Date of entry:8/6/2019)

13 توترات المضائق تضع إمدادات النفط العالمية على المحك، الأناضول، 2018/7/27، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/9/21)

14 أزمة هرمز: سعر برميل النفط سيصل إلى 100 دولار، لبنان 24، 2019/5/19، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/21)

all of which, depending on the above data, will result more from Iran's behavior than from the American behavior.

One of the most important things that makes it likely for the policy of brinkmanship between the US and Iran to continue, without going to war, or reaching a new nuclear deal in the short term, is the fact that Iran counts on the coming US elections in 2020. Former US Secretary of State John Kerry in an interview said that he met with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif three or four times since leaving office and that their talks touched on the international nuclear agreement. During the meeting, Kerry reportedly urged Tehran not to withdraw from the nuclear deal, and wait until 2020, where the Democrats believe that they will defeat Trump in the presidential election, which infuriated Trump and pushed him to accusing Kerry of treason[15]. But the question is: Is Iran really capable of bearing the consequences of zeroing its oil exports until 2020? Although this seems difficult, Iran may agree to sitting on the negotiation table with the US administration for gaining more time without necessarily reaching a new agreement until the US presidential election passes. To ensure effectiveness of this option, Iran may demand suspension of the US decision to bring its oil exports to zero as a precondition for engaging in new negotiations.

While excluding the option of war spares Turkey catastrophic security risks, militarily, politically and economically, the continuation of the brinkmanship policy for some time, which is likely according to this paper, puts Turkey in a great strategic predicament. Turkey has established its foreign policy on maintaining a balance between the conflicting parties regionally and internationally, including Russia, the United States, Saudi Arabia and Iran. The continuation of escalation between the United States and Iran is likely to tighten the screws on Turkey; as the balance policy requires a kind of calm and stability in the regional and international environment, while the conflict environment usually drives countries to adopting coercive options that break their equilibrium in their relations with the outside world, especially in terms of bias towards one axis at the expense of another – which occurred in Turkey's abiding by the US decision on bringing Iranian oil exports to zero, despite the negative repercussions of such a decision.

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[15] رافد جبوري، هل تضرب أميركا إيران؟، العربي الجديد، 2019/5/18، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/21)

Second: Zeroing Iranian Oil Exports and Turkish Calculations

In this context, while Turkish interests push for not complying with the US decision, Turkey announced keenness on abiding by the US move and decided to stop importing Iranian oil. What are Turkish calculations? What is the background of Turkey's commitment to such a decision?

Turkish calculations: Turkey opposes US sanctions against Iran, particularly on the oil sector, and considers them unilateral decisions that violate the international law and Security Council resolutions.

This stance is based on:

First, Turkey fears that Iran's withdrawal from the nuclear deal and its obligations, particularly with regard to raising the level of uranium enrichment to more than 3.67% - the ceiling set by the agreement – would allow Iran to possess nuclear weapons (To produce a nuclear bomb, Iran needs to raise uranium enrichment rate to 90%): On the one hand, this is a very dangerous step for Turkey's security, as the possession of nuclear weapons by a state on its eastern border could open the door to several catastrophic scenarios. On the other hand, Iran's possession of such weapons would change the balance of regional powers in favor of Iran, in the face of its opponents and regional rivals, particularly Turkey.

Second, Turkish-Iranian economic relations are good to a great extent. The two countries have common land border of 600 km and three official customs gates. Thus, the geo-economic realities necessitate rapprochement and cooperation. Turkey is a corridor for Iran and its goods towards Europe while Iran is a corridor for Turkey towards Asia. Geographic convergence has also facilitated transportation and reduced its costs[16]. The volume of trade exchange between the two countries during 2018 amounted to about 12 billion dollars[17]. The non-oil sector recorded $ 3.7 billion[18] during the same year. In the energy sector, Turkey relies on Iran to provide 12% of oil and 20% of natural gas[19]. For Iran, Turkey is an important means of circumventing US sanctions, especially on the oil

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16 مصطفى خضري، العلاقات الاقتصادية التركية الإيرانية، مركز التفكير الاستراتيجي، 2015/12/23، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/21)

17 مليار دولار حجم التجارة غير النفطية بين تركيا وإيران، ترك برس، 18\2\2019، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/21)

18 إيران ترغب في ازدياد التبادل التجاري مع تركيا، قناة العالم، 18\7\2018، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/21)

19 مايكل نايتس، التحكيم في مسألة خط أنابيب العراق-تركيا: تفادي الكارثة في السياسات، معهد واشنطن، 2019/5/8، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/9/21)

sector. In fact, it is a mutual interest, and Turkey considers the energy sector as a matter of national security, where it relies on 94% of its oil consumption, and more than 99% of the gas consumption on import[20] from abroad.

Third, Turkey gets Iranian oil at a low price. Due to its geographic proximity, the cost of transporting oil is also low. Turkey's suspension of reliance on Iranian oil involves additional costs related to the adaptation and modernization of Turkish oil refineries to process oil from countries other than Iran.

Fourth, tensions in the Libyan and Venezuelan arena, along with the US-Iran escalation and the sanctions imposed on Iran, led to the rise in oil prices up to $ 74 per barrel[21] on 24 April. With the eight countries' commitment to the US decision of stopping Iranian oil imports, oil prices may see a surge. All these factors are not in favor of Turkey which relies on importing 94% of its oil needs from abroad. According to figures from the Turkish Statistical Institute, Turkey's total energy imports rose by 15.5% in 2018 compared to 2017, reaching about $ 43 billion against $ 37.2 billion[22] in the preceding year.

Fifth, in 1973, the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline agreement was signed by the two countries, stipulating that the Turkish government must comply with the instructions of the Iraqi side regarding the movement of crude oil coming from Iraq at all storage and disposal centers and terminal. However, since early 2014, Ankara allowed the Kurdistan region of Iraq to export oil independently of the federal Ministry of Oil, which enabled the Kurdistan region to sell its oil directly and retain its revenue. Baghdad considers this practice illegal, but the Kurds consider it compensation for the salaries withheld by the central government. In May 2014, the Iraqi Oil Marketing Company filed a lawsuit subject to arbitration by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) against the Turkish government, represented by the state-run Petroleum Pipelines Corporation, BOTAŞ, for breaching its obligations under the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline Agreement. Any ruling against Turkey would oblige Ankara to follow Baghdad's instructions on the marketing of all crude oil, as well as the likeliness of paying

[20] Yıldız Yazıcıoğlu, ABD'nin İran Yaptırımları Türkiye'yi Nasıl Etkiliyor?, Amerikanın sesi, 6\5\2019, (Giriş tarihi:21\9\2019)

[21] عاصفة قد تضرب سوق النفط وترفع الأسعار، الجزيرة نت، 2019/4/24، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/6/8)

[22] على باكير، كيف ستتعامل تركيا مع العقوبات الأمريكية على إيران؟، عربي21، 2019/4/27، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/22)

compensation to Baghdad upon the latter's complaint. If this happens, it is expected that the pipeline will be cut off from both sides in response to the ruling, particularly from the Kurdish side[23].

The Iraq-Turkey pipeline is Turkey's main crude oil source, providing 24% of its imports in March. Therefore, cutting off this pipeline is in Iran's favor, because the market will lose the ability to compensate for the shortfall resulting from the absence of Iran's share, and deepen the Turkish need for Iranian oil.

Thus, Turkey is one of the most affected countries from the US-Iran conflict at the moment. So, calming down the conflict and returning to negotiations to reach a new nuclear agreement comes largely in line with Turkey's interests; whether it will prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon that could change regional balance of power and threaten Turkey's national security, or it will restrict Iran's influence in the region. It will also enable Turkey to continue its balanced approach to foreign policy and help it resume its imports of cheap and high-quality Iranian oil, which will have a partial effect on the turbulent Turkish economy. But there seems to be no imminent breakthrough in the US-Iran conflict as we have explained. Therefore, the brinkmanship policy between the two parties is likely to continue, or a temporary de-escalation will be adopted without necessarily reaching a new nuclear deal.

Despite the negative repercussions of Turkey's commitment to the US sanctions on Iran, especially on the oil sector, Ankara has finally abided by the American decision. However, there are several reasons for the Turkish decision, including:

First, it seems that Turkey had attempted to urge the eight countries to show solidarity in the face of the American decision, and force Trump to abandon his decision even partially; but this effort was not really effective. China, the world's largest importer of Iranian oil, 613,000 barrels per day, reduced its imports in the past three months by 30 percent, as well as India and South Korea[24]. In addition,

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[23] مايكل نايتس، التحكيم في مسألة خط أنابيب العراق-تركيا: تفادي الكارثة في السياسات

[24] عبدالباري عطوان، النّفط الإيرانيّ يتدفّق "بدلالٍ" عبر الخليج ومضيق هرمز، رأي اليوم، 2019/5/7، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/22)

the two largest state-owned refining companies[25] – China Petrochemical Corporation (Sinopec Group) and China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) – have suspended purchases of Iranian oil. Thus, no one of the eight countries, even China, seems ready to stand up to Trump's decision, closing in on Turkey in the absence of any solidarity from the eight countries affected.

Second, Turkey does not have more options or even more time in the midst of the internal political and economic crises. Is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ready to risk occurrence of a further decline in the Turkish economy in the face of Trump's likely economic sanctions if Turkey continues to import Iranian oil? The exchange rate of the Turkish lira has recently fallen to 6.0758 liras against the dollar[26]. If we associate this with the AKP's decline in the last municipal elections, the loss of Istanbul and Ankara for the first time, and the decision of the Turkish High Election Board (YSK) to re-run the Istanbul municipal elections – taking into consideration Istanbul's symbolic and political significance, as the most important economic center in Turkey that provides jobs for 20% of the labor force, contributes 22% of the national product, accounts for 40% of the total taxes collected all over the country, and produces 55% of Turkish exports[27] – Therefore, President Erdogan is expected to use all available tools to resolve this municipality in favor of his party, including maintaining calm, albeit temporarily, with the United States; to avoid the impact of tension on the exchange rate of Turkish lira and the economy in general, which is likely to be reflected in the results of the election re-run.

Third, the US-Turkish relations are witnessing developments indicating the possibility of an imminent positive turn. Following are the most important indicators on this likely turn:

- The first indicator includes: elimination of the US additional 25 percent tariffs on Turkish steel imports; the release of Serkan Golge, a Turkish-American research scientist at NASA in Houston, Texas, who was convicted this year of belonging to an armed terrorist organization and sentenced to seven years and six months in prison; the Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar's statement on 27

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[25] Chen Aizhu, Sinopec, CNPC skip Iran oil purchases for May to avoid U.S. sanctions, Reuters, 10/5/2019, (Date of entry:22/5/2019)

[26] المسار الزمني لهبوط الليرة التركية، تركيا بالعربي، 16\5\2019، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/22)

[27] إسطنبول. القلب النابض للاقتصاد التركي، الجزيرة نت، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/9/22)

May that the delivery of S 400 may not be carried out in June[28], and extending the period during which Turkey must abandon the Russian S-400 defense system to the end of July[29] to give Turkey a chance to re-calculate the whole matter.

- The second indicator: the statement by Turkish Minister of Trade Ruhsar Pekcan that the Turkish and U.S. trade ministries have established a working group to achieve bilateral trade volume target, raising it from$ 20.7 billion to reach $ 75 billion[30].

- The third indicator: The Syrian file has recently witnessed new developments indicating the likeliness of a new Turkish orientation, the most important features of which is Turkey's return to its understandings with the United States at the expense of Russia:

(1) On 2 May, the Syrian regime launched a new campaign on southern Idlib and northern Hama with Russian air support, followed by a Turkish shelling of Tel Rifaat, that falls under the control of the Kurdish People's Units in partnership with Russia[31]. While some estimates suggest a Russian-Turkish understanding, allowing Russia and its allies to enter Idlib in exchange for Turkey's control over Tel Rifaat, there is a number of indications of genuine Turkish-Russian disagreements. In the recent campaign involving Russian air force, the artillery of the Fifth Corps supported by Russia, reached the of Turkish Sher Maghar control point and resulted in the wounding of at least two Turkish soldiers, which prompted the Turkish aviation to intervene to secure the point and evacuate the injured soldiers. The Russian military police at Tel Rifat contributed to confronting the attack of the forces of the National Front for Liberation, backed by Turkey[32]. Also, Turkey has recently supported the escalation in Hama and Idlib, especially the Free Syrian Army and National Front for Liberation with mortars, anti-tank missiles and Grad missiles[33], weapons that Turkey was reluctant to provide to the Syrian opposition forces, whether to preserve the Astana and Sochi tracks, or due to the American opposition to such move. Thus, there appears to be an indirect American support for Turkey and its

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[28] مؤشرات انفراجة بين أنقرة وواشنطن تنعكس على الليرة التركية، تلفزيون سوريا، 2019/5/30، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/6/8)

[29] واشنطن تمهل أنقرة شهرين لإلغاء صفقة أس-400، الشرق الأوسط، 2019/6/9، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/6/9)

[30] مجموعة عمل أمريكية تركية لزيادة التبادل التجاري، يني شفق التركية، 2019/4/21، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/6/8)

[31] تركيا تشن ضربة مكثفة على تل رفعت شمال سوريا، آر تي عربي، 2019/5/18، (تاريخ الدخول: 2019/5/23)

[32] فراس فحام، هل يوجد اتفاق تركي روسي على تبادل مناطق السيطرة والنفوذ؟، 2019/5/5، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/23)

[33] ظهور مدفع هاون تركي الصنع من عيار ثقيل بيد الفصائل في حماة، تلفزيون سوريا، 2019/6/1، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/6/8)

allies in Idlib, as part of the Trump administration's 'extreme pressure' policy against Iran and forcing Russia to return to the Geneva track after the failure of the recent Astana 12 conference.

(2) The return of Turkish-American understanding on the safe zone, reaching advanced stages, which annoyed the Russian side. On May 2019, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt çavuşoğlu announced that Turkey and the United States are getting closer to an agreement on the details of a planned safe zone[34] in northeast Syria along the Turkish border.

US special envoy to Syria James Jeffrey said on 11 May 2019 said that the safe zone in Syria will be established along the border with Turkey, and that the protection of the area will be assigned to US or Turkish forces[35], which was followed by a statement by Ilham Ahmed, the spokeswoman and co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, expressing willingness to cooperate with Turkey in the safe zone and that they do not pose any danger to Ankara. She also announced severing contact with the Syrian regime after months of negotiations[36] between the two sides. In May, Turkey allowed for the first time the leader and founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Ocalan, to meet with his lawyer[37].

This move can be read in two contexts: the first of which is President Erdogan's willingness to temporarily deescalate tension with the Kurds in order to win all the cards that would enable him to resolve the Istanbul municipal seat in the favor of his party. Second, this could be the beginning of a long-term calm with the Kurds under US auspices by reaching a compromise on the safe zone, where the US forces partially withdraw from the northern border in favor of Turkey and remain together with the Kurds in the Syrian depth and on the eastern border of Syria.

These developments cannot be separated from Turkey's suspension of its imports of Iranian oil, all of which indicate a new twist in the US-Turkish relations on the one hand, and on the other hand it

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[34] تركيا: اقتربنا من عقد اتفاق مع أمريكا حول المنطقة الآمنة في سوريا، سمارت نيوز، 2019/5/2، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/23)

[35] جيفري: المنطقة الآمنة في سوريا ستقام على امتداد الحدود مع تركيا، ترك برس، 2019/5/11، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/23)

[36] فراس فحام، مؤشرات على انعطافة تركية جديدة في الملف السوري، تلفزيون سوريا (تاريخ الدخول:2019/5/23)

[37] قبل انتخابات اسطنبول. أردوغان "يغازل" الأكراد، العربية نت، 2019/5/21، (تاريخ الدخول:2019/6/8)

indicates that the Turkish commitment to US sanctions was not for free. This had a positive impact on the Turkish lira, which rose more than 1.5% and amounted to 5.87 lira to the dollar on May 30, 2018, after it had been 6.01 lira[38] to the dollar before. All previous developments do not mean that the improvement in US-Turkish relations has become inevitable. The two parties still have many steps to take for rebuilding mutual confidence, especially from the American side. The aforementioned steps are no more than a preparation for more practical steps, for achieving real and lasting improvement in the US-Turkey interrelationship.

Recommendations

The paper proposes some options for the Turkish decision maker: The researcher believes that maintaining a state of calm with the United States has become a necessity imposed by the current reality for sparing the Turkish economy any new failures, provided that the movement in such direction should be very cautious, so as not to affect Turkey's interests and ties with the Russian side on the one hand. On the other hand, it should be addressed on a gradual basis. That is, the two parties may reach a partial agreement on certain files, as an introduction to a comprehensive deal including all files. The significance of this lies in the fact that a likely partial deal can work as a test for the effectiveness of this course in the first place as well as the seriousness of both parties. After all, Turkey should make sure it can return to its understandings with Russia if Trump breaches his promises.

On the other hand, such situation gives more time to all parties to rearrange their cards under a temporary calm, which will benefit the Turkish economy and allow President Erdogan more room for maneuver between the conflicting parties. By then, Turkey will have passed the Istanbul elections; and the US presidential election 2020 will have become imminent, which means the possibility of access of a new president with different policies.

Accordingly, the paper proposes the following:

First, Turkey can exploit the fact that its refineries are not appropriate for receiving and processing oil shipments from countries other than Iran at present, to obtain a new exemption period to enable it to renew and adapt these refineries; and the actual commencement of installation of new

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[38] مؤشرات انفراجة بين أنقرة وواشنطن تنعكس على الليرة التركي تلفزيون سوريا، 2019/5/30

modifications to oil refineries should be indicative of the seriousness of the Turkish position. This period may allow Turkey to gain more time and enable it to reorganize its papers and prepare for the post-Iranian oil period.

Second, Turkey could conclude a partial deal with Trump, based on Turkey's postponement of the Russian S-400 defense system in return for an exceptional US exemption period that enables Ankara to maintain its Iranian oil imports for a temporary period. But this decision has its negative repercussions: Russia is likely to realize that Turkey is using the deal to blackmail America and that it is not serious about buying the Russian defense system, which will have its negative repercussions on Turkey. However, Turkey can reassure the Russian side, by confirming its seriousness in buying S-400 system, and that postponement of its delivery was due to internal crises. Also, Turkey can temporarily replace the Russian S-400 defense system with another system, such as the shoulder launched missiles which are unlikely to raise any Western opposition.

Third, if Turkey fails to reach a solution with the US on extension of the exemption period, it will have to abandon Iranian oil and abide by US sanctions, in exchange for the fulfillment of the US promises to establish a safe zone in northern Syria. It is noteworthy that Turkey's postponement or abandonment of the Russian S-400 defense system has become an urgent need if Ankara wants to sustain improvement of relations with its American ally, as the latter will not allow establishment of the safe zone without Turkey's abandonment of the Turkish S-400 missiles. In the context of this option, The United States should take two important steps:

First, to mediate or pressure the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, to supply oil to Turkey at low prices; so that Turkey could make for the cost differences resulting from abandoning Iranian oil, which may be an introduction to improvement of relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and the start of a new stage that may witness radical changes in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East and its regional players on the other hand. Also, Turkey's response to US sanctions, leading to a further blockade of Iran, could push Riyadh, even without US pressure, to offer oil to Turkey at low prices.

Second, to practice pressure on the Iraqi government to abandon its complaint against Turkey in the International Chamber of Commerce, regarding Ankara's step of allowing the Kurdistan region of Iraq to export oil independently of the federal Oil Ministry. In this regard, it is expected that the ruling will be issued in favor of the Iraqi government and may result in cutting off the Iraq-Turkey pipeline, especially by the Kurdish side, which may hinder Turkish attempts to suspend its imports of Iranian oil.

Conclusion

Based on the above data, the paper concludes:

First, the outbreak of a war between the United States and Iran is not in Turkey's interest because of the security implications resulting from the war on the issues of the refugees and the Kurds, as well as the possibility of Turkey's involvement in the war, albeit at a minimum, because of its membership in NATO. However, the paper rules out the likeliness of an outbreak of war in the region, given the size and nature of the US presence, including the recent military buildup in the Gulf region, the objectives of such mobilization and the unwillingness of various parties to go to war.

Second, it is expected that the policy of brinkmanship between the US and Iran will continue, the two parties may sit at the negotiation table without necessarily reaching a new nuclear agreement, as Iran will attempt to gain more time until the next US presidential election. While avoiding such war spares Turkey high risks, the continued escalation without engaging in negotiation puts Ankara in strategic difficulties.

Third, there are many factors that may push Turkey for opposing the US sanctions against Iran, however, Ankara has stopped importing Iranian oil. The reasons behind this decision include the inability of the Turkish economy to withstand any US sanctions, in light of the decline in the lira exchange rate and the high inflation rates. It also seems that the Turkish commitment to the US decision comes within the framework of a larger deal that includes the Syrian file and will probably address all the files that cause US-Turkish tensions.

Fourth, the paper suggests alternative options for the Turkish decision-maker, including maintaining a state of calm with the United States with emphasis on the need to be cautious in any likely deal with the American side, and make sure it is carried out on a gradual basis, not only due to the possibility of Trump's failure to meet his promises as usual, but also because Turkey cannot easily disengage from its Russian partner amid their political understandings in the Syrian file and their strategic economic partnerships, including gas and power plants. Therefore, Turkey must not seek boosting its relations with the United States at the expense of its relations with Russia. Turkey must be cautious in such move, with a flexibility to return to its understandings with Russia at the expense of Washington if it has to.

However, when Turkey becomes sure of the sincerity of the American intentions through real practical steps, then Ankara should not hesitate to conclude a comprehensive agreement with the United States that brings together all the files that cause tension of their relations, even if it comes at the expense of the Russian side. While Turkey is concerned about likely Russian move against its interests in Syria, Russia is also concerned about likely Turkish action against its interests in Syria. This may explain why Turkey has not sought to eliminate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Sham liberation army) until now; as both sides have pressure cards against each other in Syria. Also, a partial American presence in the Syrian east, along with Turkey's presence in the intended safe zone, may represent a kind of support for Turkey and a balance of power in its favor in the face of any escalating move by Russia and its allies on the one hand, and a curbing factor to the Kurds in any likely alliance with the Syrian regime on the other. As for the Turk Stream pipeline, Russia needs the project even more than Turkey does, to diversify gas pipelines into Europe under the Ukrainian problem.

Although the best scenario remains in maintaining good relations with both the United States and Russia at the same time, yet it is the most difficult scenario in light of the overlap between the S-400 defense system and the safe zone.

Finally, Accomplishment of the S-400 deal may trigger a set of Western sanctions that would undermine President Erdogan's rule in the long term. Therefore, Turkey must at first postpone the S-400 missile deal and use it as a pressure card in the face of the United States, with the possibility of canceling it completely in the future when Washington fulfills at least part of its promises. In return, Turkey should acquire the American Patriot defense system at a better price, including joint production and transfer of technology. In other words, the likely cancellation of the S-400 deal should not go for free. In fact, improvement of the American-Turkish relations still requires a lot to be done, so we should not be too optimistic, and wait for practical steps from the US administration in this regard, especially in light of its negative precedents in this context.

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