Qatar has managed impact of siege: IMF

***Growth performance resilient; Banking sector remains healthy**

Considerable buffers and sound macroeconomic policies have helped Doha absorb shocks from lower hydrocarbon prices and the diplomatic rift with some countries in the region, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Qatar's growth performance remains resilient and the direct economic and financial impact of the Gulf crisis has been "manageable", IMF said in its Article IV consultation with Qatar.

"The availability of significant external and fiscal buffers and the strong financial sector should enable the country to withstand downside risks, including lower-than-envisaged oil prices, tighter global conditions and an escalation of the diplomatic rift," it said.

Terming that the near-term growth outlook is broadly "positive", it said overall, GDP (gross domestic product) growth of 2.6% is projected for 2018.

Non-hydrocarbon real GDP growth is estimated to have moderated to about 4% in 2017 due to on-going fiscal consolidation and the effect of the diplomatic rift.

"Inflation is expected to peak at 3.9% in 2018 – as the impact of the value-added tax being introduced during the second half of 2018 would mostly be felt in that year—before easing to 2.2% in the medium term," IMF said.

Headline inflation remains subdued, primarily due to lower rental prices, it said, adding the realty price index fell 11% in 2017 (year-on-year) after a 53% cumulative during 2013–16, reflecting increased supply of new properties and reduced effective demand.

Finding that the underlying fiscal position continues to improve, it said fiscal deficit is estimated to have narrowed to about 6% of GDP in 2017 from 9.2% in 2016 with the deficit been financed by a combination of domestic and external financing.

Public debt (estimated at 54% of GDP as at end-2017) remains "sustainable", it said, adding the current account is improving in the context of increased oil and gas.

Qatar's banking sector remains healthy overall, reflecting high asset quality and strong capitalization. At end-September 2017, banks had high capitalization (capital adequacy ratio of 15.4%), high profitability despite recent moderation (return on assets of 1.6%), low non?performing loans (1.5%), and reasonable provisioning ratio of non?performing loans (85%).

"Liquidity has been generally comfortable——with a liquid asset to total asset ratio of 27.3% ——though bank reserves have declined since 2015," IMF said.

The IMF directors noted that strengthened expenditure control, with emphasis on further public?service reform and accelerated reform of the public utility companies, would help Qatar improve economic efficiency. They also emphasised the importance of wage reform to reduce the public to private wage gap.

- It is still possible to deal with the direct economic and financial impact of the diplomatic crisis between Qatar and some countries in the region.
- 2.6% expected growth in GDP in 2018.
- The banking sector's situation is sound because of high asset quality and strong capitalization.
- Liquidity levels remained generally satisfactory, with liquid assets to total assets at 27.3%.

- Short-term growth prospects are generally positive.
- Current account is improving steadily as oil and gas prices rise.
- Banks recorded at the end of September 2017 high levels of capitalization and profitability.
- Qatar has ample financial space to continue to gradually adjust fiscal conditions to ensure that sufficient hydrocarbon wealth is saved for future generations.

Headache for ECB as populists take power in debt-laden Italy

FRANKFURT AM MAIN (AFP) –

The arrival of an anti-austerity, populist government in Italy has revived concerns about the country’s massive debt pile, underscoring the pitfalls ahead for the European Central Bank as it tries to wean the eurozone off its massive monetary support.

“It’s the elephant in the room, because the problem was never resolved,” said Pictet Wealth Management economist Frederik Ducrozet, noting that Italy was the only “highly indebted” euro nation not to embark on a structural reforms programme.

After a political rollercoaster ride that sent markets into a spin this week, a coalition government between the far-right League party and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement is to be sworn in Friday.

While immediate fears that the eurosceptic parties could yank Italy out of the single currency have been calmed with their pick of a pro-euro economy minister, the drama in the eurozone’s third largest economy is far from over.

Both parties came to power promising tax cuts and higher spending — in a country already saddled with 2.3 trillion euros ($2.7 trillion) of debt and plagued by low growth.

At 132 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), Italy’s debt burden is second only to bailed-out Greece, and more than double the European Union’s 60-percent ceiling.

The near-collapse of the two populist parties’ efforts to form a government and the prospect of snap elections sent Italian bond yields spiking in recent days, making it more expensive for the government to borrow money.

The bond market turbulence spread to Spain and Portugal, prompting the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung to warn of “contagion danger” that could send Italy’s debt woes spiralling out of control, dwarfing the Greek debt crises and posing a threat to the single currency in the long run.

That doomsday scenario appears to have been averted for now, and Italian yields fell on Friday as investors heaved a sigh of relief over the deal clinched in Rome — a welcome birthday present for the ECB on the day the Frankfurt institution celebrates its 20th anniversary.

— Balancing act —

The markets' anxiety about Italy comes at a sensitive time for the ECB, the eurozone's chief firefighter in a financial crisis.

After years of ultra-loose monetary policy aimed at bolstering growth and pushing up inflation to the bank's target of just under 2.0 percent, the ECB is inching towards turning off the easy money taps as the eurozone recovery has gathered strength.

Although it is still buying 30 billion euros in bonds each month, including Italian debt, it is widely expected to phase out the so-called "quantitative easing" programme this year, before raising its record-low interest rates in the second half of next year.

But the bank's slow-motion stimulus exit has been complicated by the euro area's shaky first-quarter growth figures, leaving observers to debate whether the region has hit a mere soft patch or if a downswing is in sight.

For now, most expect the ECB to stay on the sidelines of the Italian turmoil and continue carefully preparing markets for its stimulus wind-down at the next governing council meeting on June 14.

Already holding some 22 to 25 percent of Italian public debt, the independent ECB "doesn't want to and can't be perceived as aiding any specific country," said Ducrozet.

– 'No easy option' –

In the short-term, the Italian woes could paradoxically even boost the ECB's efforts by weakening the euro against the dollar. A weaker euro makes imports more expensive, driving up eurozone inflation.

Provisional inflation data released this week also seemed to support the ECB's plan to begin phasing out QE, with inflation hitting 1.9 percent in the eurozone, 2.0 percent in France 2.2 percent in Germany — well past the ECB’s target.

But as calls mount for the central bank to withdraw its crisis-era medicine, particularly in Germany, a return to higher interest rates will make it harder for heavily indebted nations like Italy and Spain to service their debt.

And if the populists in Rome stick to their spendthrift campaign pledges — including a universal basic income for Italy’s poorest and rolling back pensions reforms — Italy’s deficit could climb to between “five and seven percent” of GDP, according to analysts at M.M. Warburg bank, putting the country on “a collision course” with European partners.

The Warburg economists predicted that Italy may eventually need some kind of European aid or debt relief to prevent a full-blown crisis.

“There’s no easy option if Italy needed help tomorrow,” said Pictet’s Ducrozet. “And that’s why the ECB will be very cautious about when to raise interest rates.”

by Coralie FEBVRE

Russia to boost presence on global LNG market, helped by lower costs

FILE PHOTO: Russian Deputy Energy Minister Pavel Sorokin speaks during an interview with Reuters in St. Petersburg, Russia May 26, 2018. REUTERS/Sergei Karpukhin/File Photo

* Russia plans to produce up to 120 mln T LNG per year by 2035

* To compete with Australia, U.S. on global LNG market

By Oksana Kobzeva and Olesya Astakhova

ST PETERSBURG, June 1 (Reuters) – Russia plans to raise its annual production of seaborne liquefied natural gas (LNG) to as much as 120 million tonnes by 2035 and take market share from Australia and the United States by capitalising on low costs, a deputy energy minister said.

In December, Russia's No.2 gas producer Novatek and its partners including France's Total launched the Yamal LNG plant in the Arctic, with capacity of 17.4 million tonnes per year seen reachable by the end of 2019.

The project highlights Russia's ability to produce LNG in harsh climates and further strengthens its foothold in the global energy market.

“Russia may set a goal of producing 100-120 million tonnes (of LNG) per year by 2035,” Deputy Energy Minister Pavel Sorokin said in an interview.

“We understand this from our discussions with the companies about their potential, which they can add to their previously announced projects.”
Yamal LNG aims to help Russia double the country’s share of the global LNG market by 2020 from about 4 percent now. Qatar, aided by production costs that are among the world’s lowest, is the biggest LNG exporter with a 30 percent market share.

Novatek also plans to launch LNG production at the neighbouring Gydan peninsula.

Russia’s Gazprom, jointly with partners including Shell, launched the country’s first LNG plant in 2009 on the Pacific island of Sakhalin with a capacity of more than 10 million tonnes per year.

Yamal LNG has produced around 2 million tonnes since its launch in December.

So far, Russia has been the dominant player in pipeline gas supplies to Europe, with Gazprom supplying around a third of the continent’s needs.

Demand for seaborne LNG has taken off in recent years as it is cleaner than oil or coal, and can reach markets worldwide because it does not depend on pipeline networks. LNG is typically more expensive than pipeline gas, however.

Sorokin said he expects global LNG demand almost to double in the next 20 years to exceed 500 million tonnes per year.

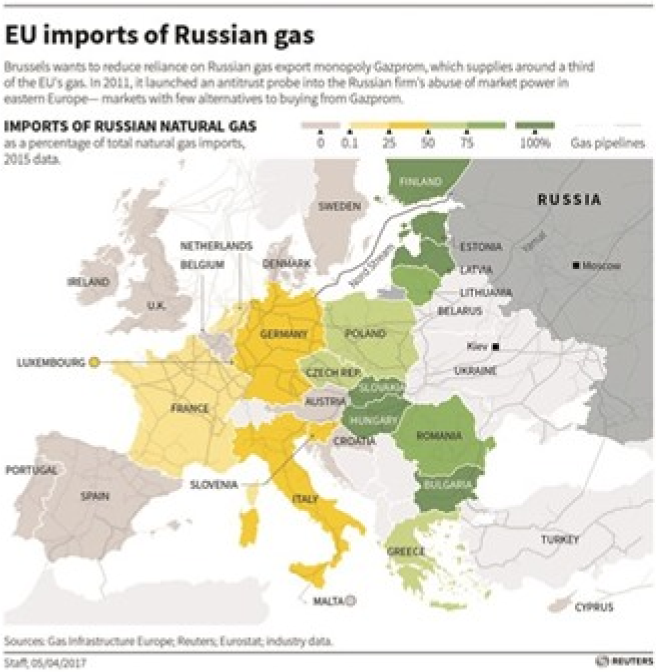
U.S. export capacity has shot up from less than 2 million tonnes per year in 2015 to 18 million tonnes in 2017, and is projected to top 77 million by 2022. That would see the United States leapfrog Australia to become the world's No. 2 exporter.

“What will trigger the rivalry are the additional volumes that the U.S. or Australia could supply,” Sorokin said, adding that Russian companies are highly competitive due to their low costs for production and transportation.

According to the Moscow-based Skolkovo think tank, average production and transportation costs at Yamal LNG for exports to Shanghai are seen at just above $8 per million British thermal units (mBtu) by 2025.

That is roughly the same as the cost for LNG projects in Western Australia and less than the approximately $9 for LNG exports from the southeastern United States.

Big Utilities Back Proposed EU Deal with Gazprom



Some big utilities in eastern Europe are backing a proposed EU antitrust settlement with Russian state gas exporter Gazprom, increasing the chances of a deal that is opposed by countries striving to loosen the Kremlin's grip over their energy sectors.

The provisional agreement, announced last month, would see Gazprom avoid a fine of up to 10% of its global turnover over EU charges it abused its dominant market position and overcharged clients in eight eastern European nations.

In return the Kremlin's gas giant, which denies the charges, has offered concessions on contract terms and pricing to settle one of the EU's largest, longest-running antitrust cases.

However, the deal is subject to feedback from EU states and market players in the region and could still be amended or even abandoned.

Many of the countries involved – once in the orbit of Moscow and reliant on Gazprom for the bulk of their gas supplies – are disappointed at the EU's deal-making.

They believe Russia has been exploiting their dependence in a region where gas prices can make or break governments and want to see Gazprom punished, EU diplomats said.

“Russia uses the full arsenal of tools to deploy influence: military, economic, political and even cultural,” an EU diplomat said. “Is there a country that doesn’t want this case solved? Probably not…but there is a lot of anger.”
EU antitrust authorities say the case is not political and that the market response will take priority.

A settlement would smooth business ties with Russia, which supplies around a third of its gas, despite tensions over Ukraine and Syria.
The agreement has drawn a positive response from some big utilities and network operators which said it would allow them to strike better deals with Gazprom, increasing the likelihood the EU will accept the Russian company’s concessions.
Bowing to EU conditions, Gazprom’s offer would see it do away with contract terms that bar clients from exporting its gas to other countries and tie deals to investments in pipelines.
The company would also link its prices to benchmarks such as European gas market hub prices, rather than oil, and allow clients to renegotiate the prices every two years.
“It (the deal) is a very welcome step if it is made a reality,” the head of Latvia’s public utilities commission, Rolands Irklis, told Reuters. “It would give Latvia a direct access to the European markets even if (it) is not directly connected to the infrastructure,” he said.
Aigars Kalvitis, head of gas utility Latvijas Gaze, which is partly owned by Gazprom, said the settlement could help it negotiate more favourable terms for its long-term Russian gas contracts, which expire in 2030.
Slovakian gas utility SPP said Gazprom had already scrapped curbs on cross-border trade and shown more flexibility on pricing in recent years.
The pledges could further boost integration on gas markets, a spokesman said, leading to “higher energy security”. The EU member states where Gazprom has allegedly engaged in anti-competitive behaviour are Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The eight

governments and industry players have until May 4 to lodge objections to the proposal in the final chapter of a case which began with raids on offices in 10 countries in 2011.
A spokeswoman for the European Commission declined to comment ahead of the EU executive’s final assessment, saying there “no formal deadline” for its decision.
Its complex, politically-charged investigation has played out against the backdrop of tense relations since the EU imposed sanctions on Russia over the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent conflict in east Ukraine, as well as deep disagreements over the Syrian civil war.
Brussels officials have repeatedly said they want to reduce the EU’s reliance on Russian gas.

Moscow argues the antitrust case is politically motivated – something denied by Brussels.
With a settlement, however, Russia would accept EU authority in applying competition law – something it has long balked at. If it fails to abide, the EU could still impose fines.

In the five years since the EU began its antitrust probe, Gazprom has shifted its strategy under pressure from increased competition from LNG imports, price arbitration cases brought by Western customers and more liquidity on Europe’s energy markets.
It abandoned some of its most contentious practices and sold stakes in some gas pipelines in response to new EU energy rules.
Gazprom “is offering new trade tools, adapting and perfecting the contract model in accordance with our clients’ needs,” Elena Burmistrova, who heads its export arm, wrote in an industry publication earlier this year.
Some EU diplomats have questioned the Commission’s decision to pursue a case against US tech giant Google that will likely lead to hefty fines while settling with Russia’s gas exporter.
Poland has threatened to take the European Commission to court if it settles on a deal that its state-run energy company

PGNiG called “far from enough”. PGNiG estimates it has been losing almost $1bn per year from buying Russian gas at oil-linked prices but reselling it at hub-linked prices.

Others say the settlement is too little, too late – particularly in the Baltic states and Czech Republic, which have taken their own steps to break Gazprom’s supply monopoly.
The Czech Republic, for example, has been buying Norwegian gas for several years.
“We have done the homework,” Czech energy security ambassador Vaclav Bartuska told Reuters. “You can only force your supplier to behave if he knows you have alternatives…fines and investigations can alleviate the situation for some time but are not a permanent solution.”
After Lithuania broke Gazprom’s supply monopoly by opening a Liquefied Natural Gas terminal in 2014, it won a 20% discount on Russian gas supplies.
Since 2015, it has been trading gas with Estonia and plans to include Latvia this year.

“Gazprom no longer has meaningful levers for influence in the Baltic states,” the head of its state-owned gas network operator Dalius Misiunas said.
Latvia, meanwhile, regards Gazprom’s settlement pledges as simply agreeing to abide by existing EU energy rules rather than making meaningful concessions, said Olga Bogdanova, head of energy at the economics ministry.
Despite the cautious optimism from bigger market players, traders and smaller clients said Gazprom’s concessions came with too many strings attached, such as restrictions on time, volume, location and fees for gas swapping.
“What kind of commitment is this, if I have to walk through fire to use them?” one executive in the Baltics said. “These commitments do not cost Gazprom anything…Gazprom should be punished.”
For Bulgaria, almost wholly dependent on buying Russian gas under a contract that runs until 2022, the stakes are high and

the clock’s ticking.
A speedy deal is the priority for the EU’s poorest nation.

The country’s independent energy regulator said it hoped a settlement would allow to renegotiate contracts pegged to oil prices before next winter.
If not, it said hot water and heating bills would rise by up to 35%, squeezing households and industries.

Lebanon Starts Offshore Energy Exploration, Defying Israel

Lebanon has started exploration of oil and gas at its offshore energy reserves in the Mediterranean waters disputed by the Israeli regime.

Lebanon's Energy and Water Minister Cesar Abi Khalil said in a televised statement that the exploration project for the country's first oil and gas reserves began on Tuesday after Lebanese officials approved a plan submitted by a consortium of France's Total, Italy's Eni and Russia's Novatek.

Khalil expressed hope that Lebanon would launch the second phase of offshore licensing by the end of 2018 or early 2019.

The announcement came after months of tensions between Lebanon and Israel over the disputed energy reserves.

No immediate reaction has been observed on the part of Israeli officials.

In December 2017, the Lebanese government granted licenses to a consortium of three international companies to carry out exploratory drilling in Lebanon’s Block 4 and Block 9 territorial waters and determine whether they contain oil and gas reserves.

Israel lashed out at the three international firms for making “a grave error” by accepting the offer. Israeli minister of military affairs Avigdor Lieberman warned that Lebanon would “pay the full price” should another war erupt between the two sides.

Lebanon, however, was quick to respond to the blatant threat, with Energy Minister Abi Khalil pledging that Beirut was going to push ahead with its exploration plans.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun also vowed to use all the diplomatic powers vested in him to resolve the dispute, saying the country had a right to “defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity by all means available.”

The territorial dispute between Israel and Lebanon runs over 776 square kilometers (300 square miles) of waters claimed by both sides.

The underlying Levant basin of the Eastern Mediterranean has been proven to contain large natural gas reserves and maybe even crude oil.

Israel itself has long been developing a number of offshore gas deposits in the Mediterranean Sea, with the Tamar gas field, with proven reserves of 200 billion cubic meters, already producing gas, while the larger Leviathan field is expected to go online in the coming months.

A source close to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in 2012 that Israel’s natural gas reserves were worth around $130 billion. A Businessweek estimate later that year put the reserves’ value at $240 billion.

Israel relies heavily on gas. According to estimates by the Israel Natural Gas Lines, the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories consumed around 9.5 Billion Cubic Meters (BCM) in 2016. The number is expected to reach 10.1 BCM in 2018.

American Boom Seen Tempting Ships to Steer Clear of Iran’s Oil

BloombergSingapore

The latest standoff between the US and Iran may be leaving oil-tanker owners in more of a bind than in previous years. As the US reimposes sanctions on the Islamic Republic, firms that help ferry Iranian oil risk losing access to the American financial system, similar to earlier in the decade when such measures were enforced. Additionally, this time around, they'll have to contend with being cut off from the booming business of transporting crude pumped from shale fields in Texas or wells in the Gulf of Mexico, according to shipbroker Braemar ACM.

The US is shipping record amounts of crude following the end of an export ban in late 2015, a few months after Iran and world powers reached a deal that eased sanctions on the Middle East nation in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme. After President Donald Trump pulled out of that accord earlier this month, the jump in American shipments is making tanker owners consider whether to stick with or shy away from the Gulf state.

"If you're an operator of young, modern tonnage that can berth and lift cargoes from the US, you won't want to be exposed to Iran," said Anoop Singh, an analyst at Braemar ACM. "Vessels associated with Iranian oil are likely to be banned from US oil trade for about two years – and this would matter more now that the US exports its crude oil."

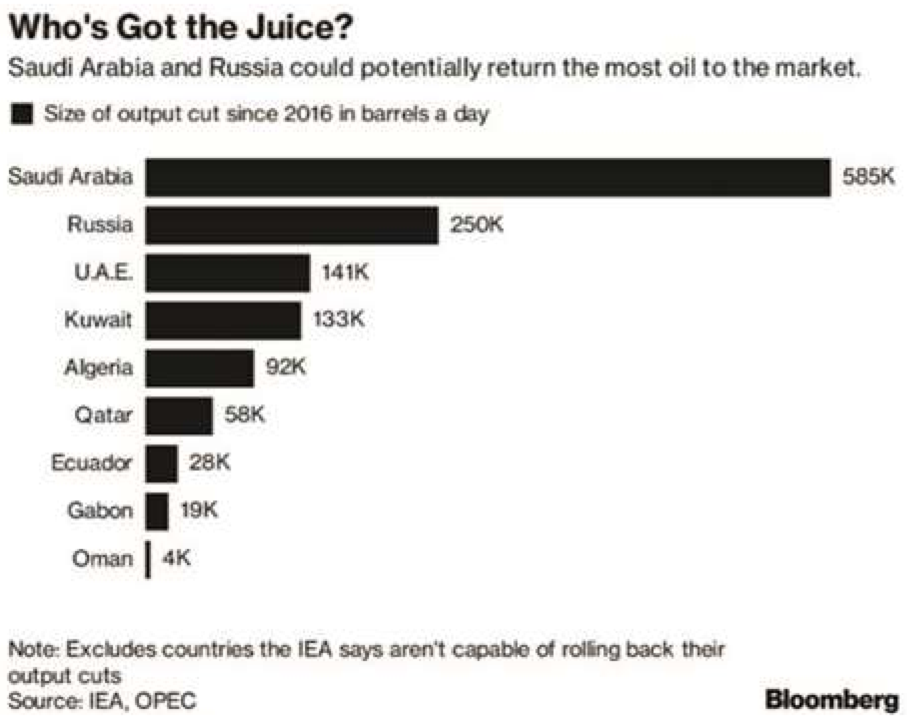
Shipowners will have to make a decision – to transport Iranian oil and petroleum products or shun dealings with Opec's third-largest producer – at a time when they are trying to revive their business after years of malaise from a global oversupply of ships and thin margins. They are also facing higher expenses from looming regulation seeking to lower emissions.

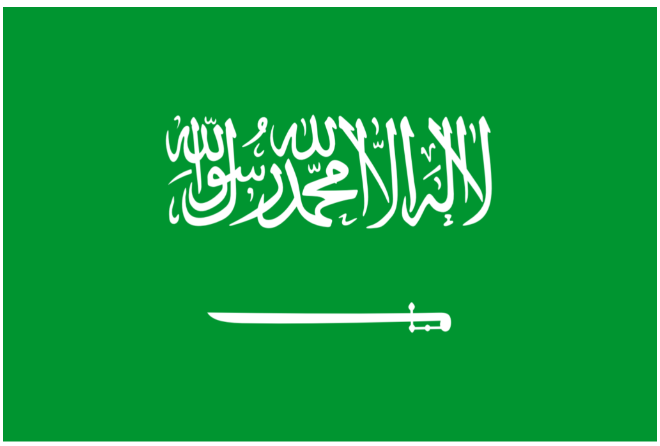
While the US may not currently feature among the biggest clients of some shipowners, few can afford to turn their backs to a market from which both exports of crude as well as refined fuel are rapidly rising. With more shale oil finding its way to the Gulf Coast for exports, or being diverted to domestic refineries to make products that are shipped abroad, more tankers of different classes are seen being drawn in to American ports.

“With a spike in exportable US crude and fuel comes a push to move more barrels faster,” Singapore-based Singh said in an interview. “This has encouraged more dredging works at shallower harbours, supporting demand for everything from small oil-product carriers to supertankers with the capability of carrying 2mn barrels of oil to destinations as far away as Asia.”

For instance, China – the world’s biggest oil importer – purchased about 3.9mn metric tonnes of crude from the US in the first three months of 2018, eight times higher than imports in the first quarter of 2017, according to customs data.

Saudi-Russia Policy Shift Sets Stage for Tense Opec Meeting





BloombergLondon

When Saudi Arabia and Russia announced a new policy to revive oil production last week, one thing was missing: most of the other partners in their grand coalition.

With oil supplies tightening and prices soaring, the two countries agreed to restore some of the output they halted as part of an accord with 22 other producers, drawn from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and beyond. The trouble is, officials from several countries in the agreement, both inside Opec and outside, said they disapproved of the proposal to raise output and saw difficulties in reaching a consensus when they meet in Vienna next month.
“It might be a contentious meeting,” said Ed Morse, head of commodities research at Citigroup Inc in New York.

The matter is particularly sensitive because Russia and Saudi Arabia are proposing raising production to make up for losses from other members, notably a worsening slump in Venezuelan supply and a potential drop in Iran as renewed US sanctions kick in. Those countries have nothing to gain from looser output caps, and plenty to lose if oil prices extend Friday’s steep decline.

Most nations in the agreement weren’t consulted about the Saudi-Russia policy to revive output. Suhail al-Mazrouei, UAE Energy Minister and current holder of Opec’s rotating presidency, said the group as a whole will decide whether to adjust output.
“No decisions made by two countries or three countries are going to be taken,” he said in an interview in St Petersburg, Russia, on Friday after meeting with his Saudi and Russian counterparts. “We respect all the member countries.”
Saudi Arabia and Russia could simply go ahead with their plan without the blessing of other players. Because they’re the only countries capable of increasing production significantly, the impact on the market would be almost as great if they chose to go it alone.
“If the rest are not on board, Saudi will do it alone, so it’s not much of a choice,” said Roger Diwan, an analyst at consultant IHS Markit Ltd in Washington.

Yet the success of the 24-nation alliance that agreed to the supply cuts seems to be valuable to the kingdom, and so they may prefer a more diplomatic route by seeking consensus. If so, it would be a tough sell.

Though they're not always enforced, Opec's rules do require policy changes be approved by all members – many of which would lose out in this case. Outside the Arab members in the Arabian Gulf, most countries aren't able to boost supplies and would face lower revenue if prices slide further.

US oil futures fell 4.5% to $67.50 a barrel in New York on Friday. That's the biggest drop in almost a year, erasing most of the gains for May.

In Venezuela, which lobbied hard to set up the 2016 accord, output has plunged to the lowest level since the 1950s as a spiralling economic crisis batters its oil industry. Losing further earnings could accelerate its financial collapse.

Iran, a long-standing political antagonist of Saudi Arabia, faces the prospect of losing customers to its rival as renewed US sanctions – imposed after President Donald Trump quit an agreement on the country's nuclear programme – force buyers to reduce purchases.

It could be that the production increases aren't substantial enough to need much consultation within the group, according to Helima Croft, chief commodities analyst at RBC Capital Markets LLC. The lower end of the range the producers are discussing – a return to levels agreed at the outset of the deal – is just a few hundred thousand barrels a day above current output.

"I strongly believe that we will find a compromise, because all countries are interested in a stable market," Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak said in a Bloomberg television interview in St Petersburg on Friday.

Opec Said to Have Reached Goal of Wiping Out Oil Surplus

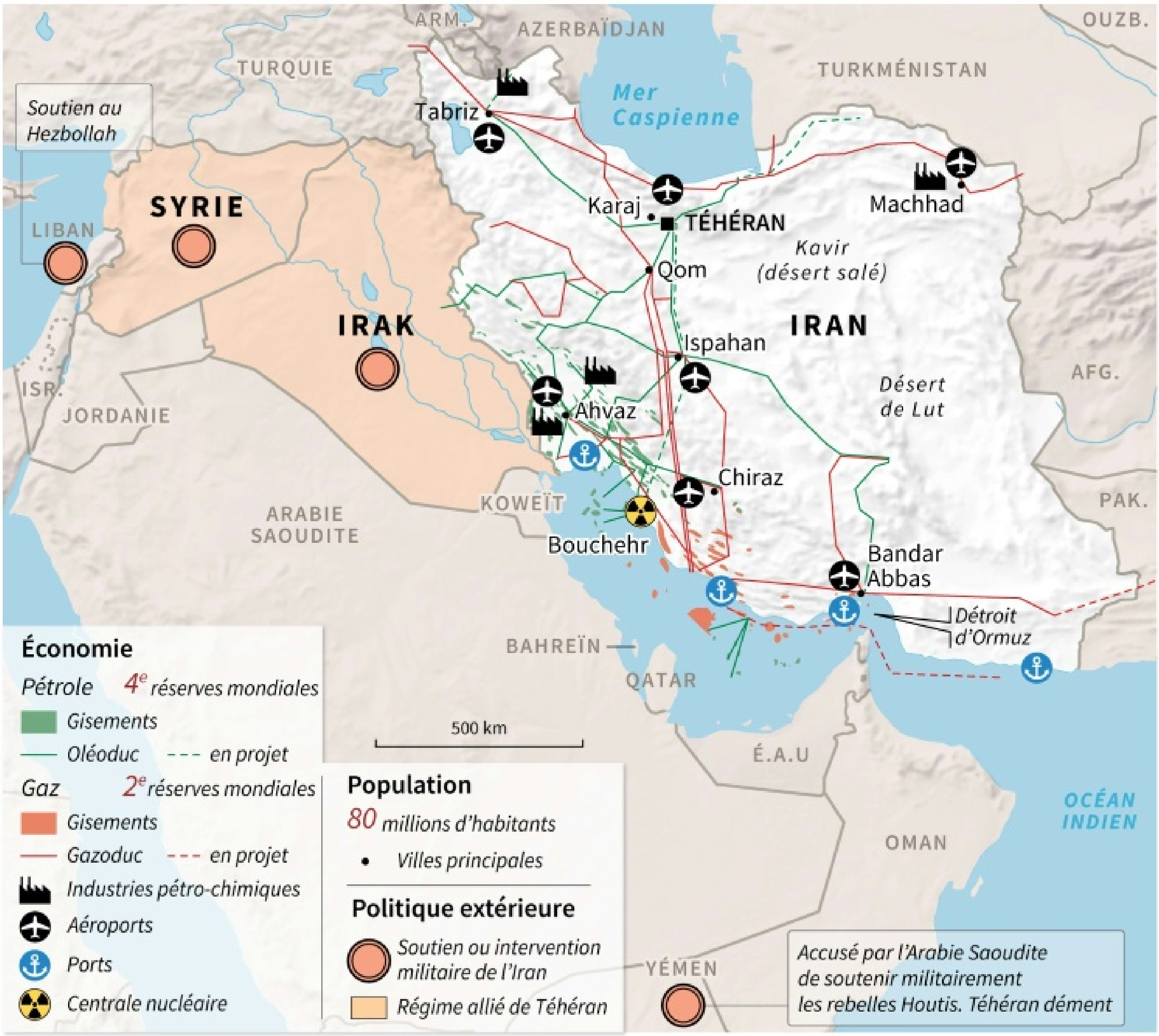
Bloomberg/Kuwait
Opec and allied oil producers including Russia concluded that the crude market re-balanced in April, when their collective production cuts achieved a key goal of draining the surplus in global stockpiles.
The excess in oil inventories, which has weighed on prices for three years, plunged in April to less than the five-year average for stockpiles in developed nations, according to people with knowledge of the data assessed at the meeting of the Joint Technical Committee of Opec and other producers last week in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

The committee, known as JTC, determined that stockpiles held by developed nations dropped to about 20mn barrels below their five-year average, for a total decrease of about 360mn barrels since the start of 2017, three of the people said, asking not to be identified because the JTC discussions were private. The decline was due to producers’ greater adherence to their pledged output cuts — their compliance rate reached 152% in April — and to summer demand for crude and refined products, according to the people. The JTC meeting precedes the producers' main gathering next month in Vienna, where they will evaluate the results of output cuts they've been making since January 2017. With supplies from Iran and Venezuela now at risk, speculation abounds that the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies may ease the cutbacks.

Top producers Saudi Arabia and Russia have said that Opec and other suppliers may boost output in the second half of the year, prompting a slide in prices which had reached $80 a barrel for the first time since 2014.
The producers have so far relied on measuring stockpiles in countries of the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development by looking at the moving 5-year average. At the meeting in Jeddah, the JTC reviewed other ways to assess oil inventories. One option is to look at a longer-range, a 10-year average from 2004 to 2014, while another is to use the five-year average but exclude data from 2015 and 2016 because those were years of abnormally large stockpiles, the people said.
The International Energy Agency said on May 16 that Opec and its allies have finally succeeded in clearing a glut, with inventories falling below their five-year average for the first time since 2014. However, Saudi Arabia and Russia have both said the five-year average is flawed. Years of excessive supplies mean that measure is itself higher than normal, while the patchy nature of data outside the OECD makes it difficult to make an accurate assessment of the world market.

Iran/Etats-Unis: derrière le nucléaire, l’UE voit aussi une guerre du gaz

L’Iran, une puissance régionale au Moyen-Orient



Sources : EIA, World Energy Atlas, NIPC, bureaux AFP

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Les Européens soupçonnent les Etats-Unis de chercher à neutraliser l'exploitation des énormes réserves de gaz iraniennes, grâce aux sanctions sur le nucléaire, afin d'ouvrir des débouchés à leur propre production, en plein essor avec le gaz de schiste.

“Les sanctions américaines vont toucher les exportations de pétrole et de gaz iranien vers l'Europe”, relève un responsable européen impliqué dans le dossier.

“Il s'agit clairement d'une nouvelle tentative de limiter une source d'approvisionnement différente afin que le gaz naturel liquéfié (GNL) américain puisse atteindre l'Europe plus facilement, sans concurrents”, explique-t-il à l'AFP sous couvert d'anonymat.

“Je ne crois pas que ce soit le but principal des sanctions contre l'Iran, mais c'est un effet induit”, nuance Marc-Antoine Eyl-Mazzega, directeur du centre Energie de l'Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI).

“Il est clair que les investissements prévus ne vont pas avoir lieu. Je ne connais pas de grande société internationale qui va s’y risquer”, a-t-il pronostiqué dans un entretien téléphonique avec l’AFP.

Au grand dam des Européens, Washington a annoncé réimposer les sanctions levées dans le cadre de l’accord multilatéral conclu en 2015 en échange de l’engagement de Téhéran à geler son programme nucléaire.

Les Etats-Unis menacent Téhéran des sanctions “les plus fortes de l’Histoire” si les Iraniens refusent leurs conditions pour conclure un “nouvel accord” englobant leur programme de missiles balistiques.

Les entreprises européennes qui continueront de faire affaire en Iran dans des secteurs interdits par ces sanctions “seront tenues responsables”, a averti le chef de la diplomatie américaine, Mike Pompeo.

-“Réserves faramineuses”-

L’annonce du possible désengagement d’Iran du géant pétrolier Total et de plusieurs autres entreprises européennes ont été au coeur des récents entretiens à Téhéran du commissaire européen à l’Energie Miguel Arias Canete.

“Les Iraniens doutent de la capacité des Européens à ne pas plier face aux intérêts américains”, a confié à l’AFP M. Canete au terme d’une série de rencontres avec le vice-président iranien Ali Saheli, le chef de la diplomatie Mohammad Javad Zarif et les ministres du Pétrole et de l’Energie.

Les Etats-Unis sont engagés dans une stratégie de conquête de marchés pour leur gaz naturel. Ils ont exporté 17,2 milliards de mètres cubes (m3) en 2017, dont 2,2% par méthaniers vers les terminaux de l'Union européenne. Or "la capacité totale d'importation de gaz naturel de l'Europe va augmenter de 20% d'ici à 2020", selon le centre d'études IHS Markit.

Chaque année, les pays de l'UE importent deux tiers (66%) de leurs besoins de consommation. En 2017, ceci a représenté 360 milliards de m3 de gaz, dont 55 milliards de m3 de GNL, pour une facture de 75 milliards d'euros, selon les statistiques européennes.

A ce jour, la moitié du gaz acheté est russe, mais les Européens cherchent à briser cette dépendance.

"Les réserves iraniennes sont faramineuses et si l'Iran développe les installations adéquates, elles peuvent permettre à ce pays de devenir un important pourvoyeur (…) pour l'Europe", plaide M. Canete.

Téhéran possède les plus importantes réserves gazières au monde après la Russie, avec notamment le gisement off-shore de Pars Sud. Elle sont estimées à 191 trillions de m3. Le pays a exporté 10 milliards de m3 en 2017 par gazoduc vers la Turquie et l'Irak. Mais la solution pour l'avenir sera le GNL, transporté par méthaniers, soulignent les responsables européens.

Le ministre du Pétrole, Bijan Namdar Zanganeh, a chiffré les besoins en investissements à quelque 200 milliards de dollars sur cinq ans. Le secteur de l'énergie a fourni 50 milliards de dollars de recettes à l'Etat en 2017, selon les données européennes.

-La Russie ciblée-

L'UE n'est pas la seule dans le collimateur de Washington.

"Un autre concurrent visé est la Russie avec son projet phare Nord Stream 2", observe le responsable européen.

Nord Stream 2 vise à doubler d'ici fin 2019 les capacités de son grand frère Nord Stream 1, et permettre à davantage de gaz russe d'arriver directement en Allemagne via la mer Baltique, donc sans passer par l'Ukraine.

Le président Donald Trump exige son abandon. Il en a d'ailleurs fait un argument pour exonérer les Européens des taxes sur l'acier et l'aluminium, selon des sources européennes proches du dossier.

La chancelière allemande Angela Merkel défend vivement ce projet de gazoduc stratégique.

"Pour le moment, le GNL américain est plus cher que le gaz russe. Nous avons un libre marché. Le GNL doit être compétitif", estime-t-on de source gouvernementale allemande.

Mais "Nord Stream 2 n'aide pas à la diversification énergétique cherchée par l'Europe", reconnaît de son côté le commissaire Canete.

"L'Europe veut développer une stratégie de gaz liquéfié afin d'assurer sa sécurité énergétique, et l'Iran est une source d'approvisionnement importante", insiste-t-il à l'adresse des Etats-Unis.

Exclusive: Qatar Petroleum CEO says pushing ahead with expansion despite Gulf embargo

DOHA (Reuters) – State energy giant Qatar Petroleum will push ahead with its production expansion and foreign asset acquisition strategy to be on par with oil majors, despite a regional political and economic embargo on Doha, its chief executive said.

QP, which produces 4.8 million barrels of oil equivalent per day (boed), aims to boost its output to 6.5 million boed in the next 8 years, and is expanding its upstream business abroad, particularly in the United States, CEO Saad Al-Kaabi told Reuters.

Qatar is one of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' smallest producers but is also one of the most influential players in the global liquefied natural gas (LNG) market due to its annual production of 77 million tonnes.

"We are in Mexico, we are in Brazil, we are contemplating investing in the U.S. in many areas, in shale gas, in conventional oil. We are looking at many things," Al-Kaabi said in an interview at QP’s headquarters in Doha.

“We are looking very critically at the United States because we have a position there. We have the Golden Pass that we are investing in,” he said.

Qatar Petroleum is the majority owner of the Golden Pass LNG terminal in Texas, with Exxon Mobil Corp and ConocoPhillips holding smaller stakes.

Al-Kaabi said “depending on the project’s cost and feasibility” he expects to take a final investment decision on expanding the Golden Pass LNG by the end of the year.

“I’m not in the business of infrastructure. I’m not going to have a liquefaction plant only. It has to be something that will be linked with an upstream business that we would buy in the U.S. so we need to be naturally hedged,” he added.

To maintain its dominance in the United States and Australia, QP is cutting costs at home and seeking to expand overseas through joint ventures with international companies.

“We will always go with one of our international partners that we have business with here in Qatar,” Al-Kaabi said. “Some of our partners want to divest, some of our partners want to acquire something together.”
QP is focusing on other opportunities in Mexico, Latin America, Africa and in the Mediterranean, he said. QP is also looking to enter Mozambique, where Exxon and Eni operate, he added.

Al-Kaabi said the share of overseas upstream production will be “a good portion” in the long-term but it won’t compare to its share at home.

“Our strategy says we are going to expand in upstream business with a little bit of downstream that will be connected to some other businesses that we are doing and a few one-off deals in petrochemicals,” he said.

PRODUCTION EXPANSION

For Qatar, which is locked in a dispute with four Arab states, broadening its investments outside the Middle East would cement its position as the world’s largest LNG supplier and help it to weather the boycott with its neighbors.

In June last year, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt cut diplomatic, economic and transport ties with Qatar, accusing it of backing terrorism, a charge which Doha denies.

In an apparent show of strength, a month later QP announced plans to raise LNG production capacity by 30 percent to 100 million tonnes per year.
Qatar has lifted a self-imposed ban on the development of the North Field, the world’s biggest natural gas field, which it shares with Iran, in April last year and announced a new project to develop its southern section, increasing output in five to seven years.

The announcement came at a time of an oversupply in the LNG market, but Al-Kaabi said such a glut would disappear in 2021-2022 driven by the rising demand for gas amid the global move towards cleaner fuels and climate change concerns.

QP has selected Japan’s Chiyoda Corp for the front-end engineering and design (FEED) of the onshore facilities of the North Field expansion project and awarded McDermott a contract for the offshore engineering work, Al-Kaabi said.

QP has abandoned plans to debottleneck its existing liquefaction trains because it involved shutdowns and prompted safety concerns, and opted to build three new LNG trains, he said.

“Stay tuned,” Al-Kaabi said, when asked if QP’s announcement that the award to Chiyoda included a pre-investment for a fourth train as had been announced.

If QP decided to build a fourth train, that could mean possibly expanding gas production beyond 100 million tonnes per year.

Al-Kaabi said QP will award the engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) contract for the first LNG train by the end of next year, with its start-up set for the end of 2023.

QP is in talks with international oil companies for the new expansion project. Oil companies operating in Qatar now include Exxon, Total and Royal Dutch Shell.

QP will make a decision on the foreign partners by the end of 2018, Al-Kaabi said.

“There are some new companies that have come and put forward some proposals … but I don’t see the face of what we are doing and the companies that we have changing much.”