

(Japanese Version)

(Arabic Version)

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Geopolitics in the Middle East: Enemy's enemy is an ally or another enemy?

1. The modern Middle East where enemies and allies are commingled



In Middle East many conflicts took place in the past. Conflicts between Israel and Arabs are typical one. Although the recent peace agreements between Israel and two Gulf monarchies, UAE and Bahrain, were concluded but many other disputes occurred nowadays.

In religious ground Shi'a Iran and Sunni Arabs blame each other. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Qatar over the dispute of the Muslim Brotherhood. All of them are Sunni countries. Civil wars in Libya and Yemen were not over yet. It looks like the proxy fight between regional big powers like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt.

Recently, demarcation of EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) on the continental shelf or laying gas pipeline in the eastern Mediterranean become a hot topic. There are many other humanitarian issues; the Kurdish independence has a long history, and Syrian civil war resulted in the influx of refugees into the EU. Another problem threatens regional stability; Turkey is shaking over NATO and EU which are the core aspect of Western Europe and the Middle East after World War II in terms of politics, defense and economy.

Enemies and allies are struggling each other by individual issues. And some countries support or sympathize with one of two parties. The enemy's ally is the enemy for one party sometime. However, it is not uncommon that one country which supports or sympathizes with another country may act contradictory on another issue. It becomes unclear whether the enemy's ally is enemy or the enemy's enemy is another enemy. Observing the modern Middle East, it is extremely difficult to understand what the alliance or adversary is all about.

First, look at allies and enemies in accordance with the disputes. Then classified which country is the ally or enemy, and which countries support or sympathize the respective parties. Then Turkey is picked up as a major game player. This paper is an attempt to analyze the complex power matrix of the modern Middle East.

2. Conflicts and involved countries

(1) Disputes related to independence of nations

(1-1) Israeli–Palestinian issue

[Subject] Approval of the Israeli state and independence of the Palestinian state.

[Rivalry] Israel vs Palestine (PLO).

[Stakeholder] Israeli side: United States, Palestinian side: Arab countries and OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) Member countries.



(1-2) Kurdish independence issue

[Subject] Disputes over the independence or autonomy of the Kurds

[Rivalry] Kurdish: (PKK in Turkey, YPG in Syria, Kurdish Patriotic Union in Iraq) vs Governments of Turkey, Syria and Iraq

[Stakeholder] Kurdish side (Human rights group in Western countries)



(1-3) Northern Cyprus Independence Issue

[Subject] Separatism in northern part of Cyprus

[Rivalry] Cyprus vs Turkey

[Stakeholder] Cyprus side: Greece (and all countries except Turkey)



(2) Religious disputes

(2-1) Conflict between Shiites and Sunnis of Islam

[Subject] Political and/or military struggle between two major Islamic sects

[Rivalry] Iran vs Arab countries

[Stakeholder] Iran side: Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Houthi



(2-2) Conflict over the Muslim Brotherhood¹

[Subject] Internal conflict of GCC countries over whether the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organization or not

[Rivalry] Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt vs. Qatar.

[Stakeholder] Qatar side: Turkey.



(3) Civil war (proxy war)

(3-1) Yemeni Civil War²

[Subject] Battle for power after ex-President Saleh, who was dismissed in the Arab Spring

[Rivalry] The Houthis which controls the northern part including the capital Sana'a vs Hardy caretaker government and Southern Transitional Council aiming the independence of southern part of the country

[Stakeholder]

Houthi side: Iran,

Hardy Caretaker Government side: Saudi Arabia and its coalition force



(3-2) Libyan Civil War

[Subject] Battle for initiative between the eastern and western powers after the collapse of the Gaddafi administration in the Arab Spring

[Rivalry] Sirraj provisional government in Tripoli vs Libyan National Army (LNA, Commander: Haftar) in Eastern Benghazi

[Stakeholder]

Sirraj caretaker government side: Turkey / Qatar / Italy

LNA side: Egypt / UAE / France / Saudi Arabia



(4) Disputes regarding territorial waters and/or islands

(4-1) Natural gas development in the East Mediterranean³

[Subject] Territorial waters and EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) dispute over natural gas development off the eastern Mediterranean coast

[Rivalry] Turkey vs Cyprus and Greece

[Stakeholder]

Turkish side: Libya (Sirraj caretaker government), Russia

Cyprus and Greek side: Israel, France



(4-2) Conflict over natural gas pipeline

[Subject] Laying pipeline under East Mediterranean to export natural gas to Western Europe

[Rivalry] Turkey (Black Sea South Stream) vs Israel, Greece and Cyprus (East Med Pipeline)

[Stakeholder]

Israel/Greece/Cyprus side: USA

Turkish side: Russia



(4-3) Territorial dispute about three islands in the Persian Gulf

[Subject] Territorial rights of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa Islands.

[Rivalry] Iran vs UAE

[Stakeholder] UAE side: GCC countries



(5) Conflict between Western European countries and Turkey

(5-1) NATO Military Alliance

[Subject] Turkey is the only one member from the Islamic world in NATO, which was established to counter the former Soviet Union during the Cold War. The role of Turkey is changing due to the geopolitics of the Eurasian continent.

[Rivalry] Turkey vs US, UK, Germany and France

[Stakeholder] Turkish side: Russia



(5-2) Accession of Turkey to the EU

[Subject] Turkey has been left behind due to the Islamic country

[Rivalry] Turkey vs current EU member states

[Stakeholder] Turkish side: Russia



(5-3) Syria–Afghanistan refugee issue

[Subject] Refugees from Syria and Afghanistan heading to Europe via Turkey. Germany is cooperative to Turkey with humanitarian points of view. But Greece, Italy, and France, which are concerned about domestic security, refuse to accept refugees.

[Rivalry] Turkey vs Western European countries

[Stakeholder] (Nothing in particular)



In addition to the above, the following problems entailed the dispute in Middle East though the outcome has been almost settled or clarified.

- Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War (1990–91)
- 9.11 Terrorist attacks in the United States (2001) (Islamic terrorism problem)
- Iraq War (2003)
- Syrian Civil War (2018–) (after the corruption of Islamic State, IS)

3. Turkey; Mastermind of troubles

In the previous section, the conflicts in the Middle East were listed from the points of rivalry and stakeholders. In this section, Turkey is analyzed as the main player of the conflicts.

(1) Natural Resource⁴



In the eastern Mediterranean, offshore of Cyprus Island is hotspot for development of natural resource since Egypt and Israel have discovered large gas reserves. Submarine pipelines to send natural gas to Europe are also planned.

Republic of Cyprus is island country. But Turkish inhabitants in the northern half of the island have declared independence as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. No other countries except Turkey recognizes its independence. Turkey insists that their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extends over Cyprus Island and they have the right to develop resources throughout the eastern Mediterranean

because the continental shelves of Eurasia and Africa connected together. Turkey disregards the claims of the Republic of Cyprus and is implementing gas exploration activity by their own rig with the escort of its Navy⁵. The Cyprus government has protested that Turkey violated Cyprus' sovereign right and hindered its own exploration activities with French oil company Total. French government backed up

Total and warned Turkey strongly⁶.

Concerning the submarine gas pipeline, Israel and Egypt have a plan to lay EastMed pipeline to Europe via Greece⁷. Recently several countries including Israel, Egypt, Cyprus and Greece have formed the Eastern Mediterranean Energy Forum⁸. On the other hand, Turkey has signed a treaty with Libyan caretaker government against EastMed pipeline plan. Turkey claims that the Mediterranean Sea connects two countries with continental shelf and Turkey has the right of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)⁹. For counter attacks, Greece has agreed to demarcate a maritime border with Egypt to block Turkish ambition¹⁰.

Turkey has another gas pipeline project to export natural gas from Russia to Europe via Turkey. So-called South Stream pipeline is under construction in Black Sea. The connection point at European continent will be troublesome Greece. Turkey wants to secure another route via the Mediterranean Sea.

Turkey and Greece are rivalry. France and Egypt are behind Greece. But for Turkey, Egypt is an ally of OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) and France is a military ally of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). The enemy's (Hellenic) ally is not necessarily the Turkish enemy.

(2) Political, economic and military alliance (EU & NATO)

Turkey had applied for EU membership many years ago. But Eastern European countries like Hungary got official members prior to Turkey though they applied later than Turkey. Anti-EU sentiment has emerged in Turkey. Turkish people now are confident that EU accession is hopeless. Regarding the NATO Turkey is an original member of NATO since its inception. Nowadays NATO's raison d'être has changed because the Cold War was over. But the United States has claimed the threat of Russia and appreciated the geopolitical value of Turkey.

Taking this circumstance into consideration, Turkey has offered the United States to purchase the state-of-the-art stealth fighter F-35. The idea is not materialized yet due to the opposition by Israel. Then Turkey has announced its intention to introduce the S-400 surface-to-air missile system from Russia and shook the United States. They are in the middle of a bargain now¹¹.

Basic problem under the EU and NATO is that Turkey is the only one Islamic state. No one can deny that the United States and Western Europe are Islamophobia and Erdogan advocates the value of Islam. The problem is complicated.

(3) Syrian refugees

In Syria, nearly 6 million refugees have been evacuated abroad during a complicated civil war between Assad government, anti-government rebel groups and IS (Islamic State). Turkey has received about 4 million refugees. Many of them wished to migrate to Western Europe especially to Germany via Greece

or Bulgaria. However, Greece closed its border with Turkey because European countries became reluctant to receive many refugees. Increase in the number of refugees resulted in domestic instability so European countries began to restrict immigration. Now civil war in Syria has almost ended. And the influx of new refugees to Turkey has stopped. But many Syrians are still staying in refugee camps in Turkey. This makes the Turkish government a heavy burden. Turkish government urges EU to tackle the issue together. Greece, Italy and France are reluctant. Only Germany, which has historical ties with Turkey is cooperative.

(4) Kurd issue

The Kurdish people with 46 million in population are living scattered in four countries: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Kurd has its own entity in each country. They are PKK in Turkey, YPG in Syria and Kurdish Patriotic Union in Iraq. These entities are fighting for independence or autonomy against the central governments of respective countries.

Turkish government regards the PKK as a terrorist organization and has taken firm policy. On the other hand, Turkey is cooperative with the Syrian YPG. There are two reasons for Turkish dual policy. One is to separate PKK and YPG each other to prevent the Kurdish unitization. Another reason is to weaken the Assad regime of Syria. The anti-Assad forces are weak coalition and one of the forces is supported by United States and Saudi Arabia. In the early stages of the civil war, the rebels and Assad government cooperate to oust the IS (Islamic State) forces. However, after the destruction of IS, anti-Assad forces fell in piece and the Assad regime with Russian support has overcame rebels. Turkey does operation to eradicate PKK crossing the border into Syria.

(5) Turkey as a stakeholder

In addition to the above case in which Turkey is involved as rivalry, Turkey sometimes plays as a stakeholder. The Qatar issue and the Libyan Civil War are such case.



The Qatar issue means that four countries consisting of three GCC states (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain) and Egypt severed the diplomatic tie with Qatar in 2017. Four countries condemned that Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamic terrorist organization while Qatar accepted the same entity. Other two GCC states, Oman and Kuwait, took a neutral position. Qatar was isolated among GCC countries¹². Turkey extended its support to Qatar. As a result, Turkey's relations with four countries have deteriorated.

The reason of conflict is in the difference of political control system. Egypt's military regime was once defeated by Muslim Brotherhood in the "Arab Spring" and regained control by military coup d'etat a year later. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain are secular states with absolute monarchy. Egypt and the Gulf monarchies are

vigilant against the Islamic Brotherhood, which threatens their regime. On the other hand, Turkey is a secular democratic state with a direct election of the president. Turkish ruling party, AKAP, has a strong affinity with Islamic Brotherhood. So Turkey supports Qatar, which is a monarchy but is tolerant of the Islamic Brotherhood.

Turkey's involvement in the Civil War in Libya is motivated by the EEZ agreement on the continental shelf of eastern Mediterranean. Turkey supports the caretaker government in Tripoli. Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, France and Russia support the Libyan National Army (LNA) based in Benghazi. LNA is a counterpart of caretaker government. Libyan Civil War is, therefore, a proxy war between Turkey and Egypt.

Turkey changes its position depend on the issue. Generally speaking, Turkey's main adversaries are Saudi Arabia and Egypt in Middle East and the EU outside the region. United States or Russia is Turkey's ally or enemy on a case-by-case. Sometime two super powers participate in the game or stay in neutrality.

(End)

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