

THE BIPOLAR CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST OVER THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

– WHY SAUDI ARABIA, THE UAE, AND EGYPT SEE THE BROTHERHOOD AS A THREAT –

Ito Mashino

EMEA & Russia Dept., Global Economic & Political Studies Div.

Mitsui & Co. Global Strategic Studies Institute

SUMMARY

- Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt regard the Muslim Brotherhood as dangerous and have tightened their crackdown on the organization, which once had immense powers of mass mobilization and temporarily strengthened its political voice in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring.
- Turkey and Qatar, however, support the Brotherhood and aim to use it as leverage to deflect criticism from domestic and foreign Islamist groups and to secure regional political dominance.
- The bipolar conflict between countries that view the Brotherhood as a threat and countries that support the organization has already affected the Qatar diplomatic crisis and the Libyan civil war, and may spread to various parts of the region and to East Africa. It will be necessary to keep an eye on the direction of the bipolar conflict while paying attention to the signs of a thawing in relations between Turkey and Egypt and the UAE from the beginning of the year.

When explaining the background to the various political conflicts in the Middle East, such as the Qatar diplomatic crisis and the Libyan civil war, the Islamist organization known as the Muslim Brotherhood often emerges as a key word. At the present time, various Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, are on their guard against the Brotherhood and trying to eliminate it. At the same time, regional confrontation has taken on a bipolar aspect with Turkey and Qatar supporting the organization.

This confrontation over the Brotherhood has quite a few ideological elements, and because there are few opportunities for research and analysis on the subject to be made known outside of academic circles, the true nature of the situation is difficult to discern. To help deepen understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood, an entity that cannot be ignored in getting a grasp on the situation in the Middle East, this report will explain the organization's ideology and activities, and the reason why it causes conflict.

CONFLICT OVER THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Arab Spring propelled the Brotherhood onto the center stage of politics

The Muslim Brotherhood is a long-standing Islamist organization that originated in Egypt and has branches around the world, mainly in the Middle East. The organization has survived for more than 90 years, and in accordance with changes in the regional power balance during that time, its activities have been regulated, suppressed, or supported by different countries. It was the Arab Spring that brought special attention to the Brotherhood's existence. The popular protest movement that arose in Tunisia at the end of 2010 spread instantly

to other Arab countries, causing governments to fall one after the other in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen. While Syria avoided a collapse of government, it remains in a state of civil war to this day. Protests spread on the streets and via social media in other countries as well, forcing each of the countries concerned to respond (Figure 1). The Arab Spring has significantly changed the power map of the Middle East.

Figure 1: The legacy of the Arab Spring



Note: In Iran, anti-government protests occurred in 2011 in Khuzestan in the southwest of the country, an area that is home to many Arabs.
 Source: Created by MGSSI based on information from the Council on Foreign Relations (<https://www.cfr.org/article/arab-spring-ten-years-whats-legacy-uprisings>) and other sources

While the Brotherhood was not at the center of these movements, it took advantage of the turmoil to strengthen its political influence. In Tunisia, the Islamist political party Ennahda, an offspring of the Brotherhood, became the leading party in parliamentary elections held in October 2011, while in Libya, the National Forces Alliance and the Justice and Construction Party, which support or are aligned with the Brotherhood, became the top two political parties following the establishment of a provisional government in Tripoli in the west of the country¹. In Egypt, Mohammed Morsi, a senior figure in the Brotherhood, was elected in the presidential elections held in May and June 2012.

A bipolar conflict over the Brotherhood

The countries of the Middle East responded to this situation in one of two ways. Turkey and Qatar, which have supported the Brotherhood for a while, marched in step, supporting Brotherhood parties in each country and strengthening their presence in the Middle East while drawing closer to Iran. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, which resumed its clampdown on the Brotherhood after the launch of the new government following the 2013 military coup, were alarmed not only by the Brotherhood itself, but by the rise of Turkey and Qatar, which were harboring the Brotherhood.

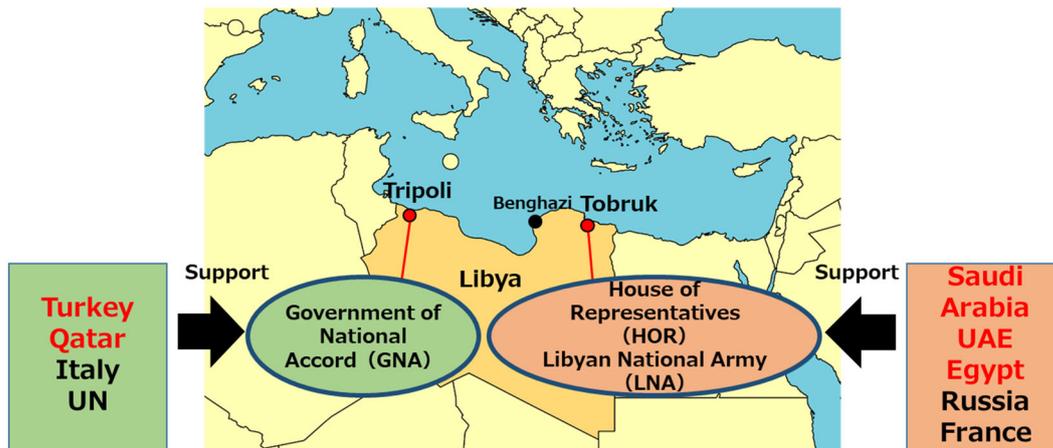
It was under these circumstances that the Qatar diplomatic crisis occurred in 2017, when four countries, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain, which is strongly influenced by Saudi Arabia, severed diplomatic ties with

¹ Libya's provisional transitional authority, the National Transitional Council (NTC) was formed in October 2011, and transferred authority to the General National Congress (GNC) through a parliamentary election held in July 2012. In December 2015, the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement was signed, and the unified Government of National Accord (GNA) came into being. However, the House of Representatives (HOR) and the Libyan National Army (LNA), which are based in Tobruk in eastern Libya, refused to hand over authority. The eastern and western governments are still at loggerheads, and the conflict is currently at a stalemate (see Figure 2).

Qatar. Because they had designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, the four countries called for Qatar to cease its support for the Brotherhood, and also made other demands, including the withdrawal of Turkish troops stationed in the country². While the issue of diplomatic ties itself was resolved in January 2021 by an agreement between the quartet and Qatar, the status of the abovementioned demands remains up in the air, and a fundamental settlement has yet to be realized.

In Libya, where governance is divided between the east and west of the country, Turkey and Qatar support the western government, which as mentioned previously is close to the Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt support the secular government in the east, yet another example where conflict over the Brotherhood is apparent (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Conflict over the Libyan civil war



Source: Created by MGSSI based on information from The Nikkei (December 26, 2019) (<https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO53859720W9A221C1FF8000/>) and other sources

WHY IS THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD CONSIDERED DANGEROUS?

The formation and development of the Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded as a secret society in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna, an elementary school teacher in the northeastern city of Ismailia in the early 20th century when Egypt was a de facto British colony. The basic ideology behind the Brotherhood was to banish (British) imperialism, and seek to restore Islamic rule and reunify Islamic countries.

Although the Brotherhood was essentially subject to repression even after the establishment of the Republic of Egypt in 1953, the organization avoided decisive conflicts with the regime, and sought to spread its ideology and acquire the power to mobilize the masses by engaging in social service activities and participating in elections. The Brotherhood's activities spread not only to other Arab countries, but also to countries in South and Southeast Asia, and it held annual international conventions in the early 2000s. However, following the fall of the Morsi government in the 2013 military coup, the Brotherhood was compelled to significantly reduce its activities due to a severe crackdown by the authorities, particularly in Egypt, and its international network was also said to have become fragmented.

Countries that want to eliminate the Brotherhood and those that want to use it

Then why is the Brotherhood, whose existence can be said to hang in the balance, still regarded as dangerous? It is believed to be due to the organization's flexibility and its active involvement in politics. As a fundamental principal, Islamist organizations, regardless of whether they are moderate or extremist, idealize the role of the caliph, as the representative of Allah, in ruling over the Muslim community in accordance with Islamic law.

² The Turkish army began stationing troops in Qatar around 2014.

However, the Brotherhood has approached that particular doctrine in a flexible and pragmatic manner, prioritizing the survival of the organization under periodic suppression by policymakers. Thus, it has sought political change through legal means, including participation in elections, at times defending democracy, at other times in collaboration with non-Islamist groups. That is in stark contrast to the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, which reject the existing system itself, and base themselves in areas where there is a power vacuum from which they engage in acts of terrorism.

In Egypt, the former Morsi administration invited Copts (Coptic Christians) and other non-Muslims into the Brotherhood's political party, and it was even said that "political freedom and political participation expanded to unprecedented levels" in response to the public's demand for democratization³. In the end, it proved impossible to control the powerful military and the Brotherhood's political control did not last long, but there is talk both within and outside Egypt of the possibility of a recurrence of the Arab Spring, which the Brotherhood could use to its advantage to return to the center stage of politics. The biggest fear of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE is likely to be that they may be the next country in which such a situation arises.

Turkey and Qatar, on the other hand, portray themselves as the guardians of Islam, and attempt to deflect criticism from Islamist groups at home and abroad by supporting the Brotherhood. Furthermore, with Turkey aiming to expand its influence in the Middle East amid deteriorating relations with Europe and the US, and Qatar facing competition in the political and economic spheres with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it is likely that both countries want to use the Brotherhood as leverage to gain advantage.

With regard to the relationship with the Brotherhood, Turkey's ruling Islamist party, the AKP, has been reorienting its policy away from the westernization since its establishment in 2001 towards Islamization, and has drawn closer to the Brotherhood. In the case of Qatar, the country offered protection to members of the Brotherhood, including giving asylum to the prominent Islamic scholar and Brotherhood ideologue Yusuf al-Qaradawi in 1961, and also provided economic assistance to Egypt under the Morsi administration. As a consequence, the Brotherhood prioritizes the organization's survival by refraining from criticizing either country.

FUTURE FOCAL POINTS

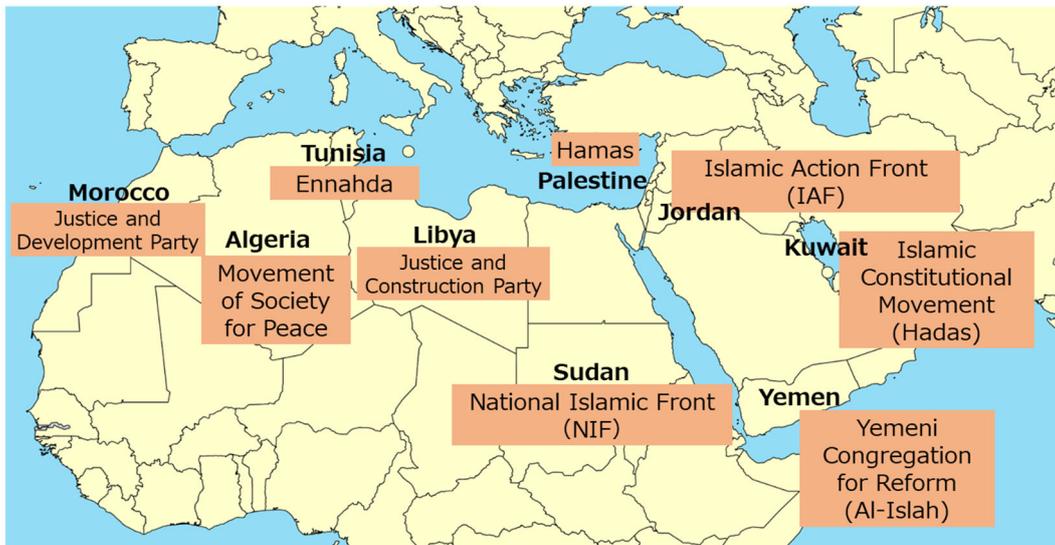
The Brotherhood takes root in the Middle East and North Africa

The current Sisi administration in Egypt is playing up the threat posed by the Brotherhood and tightening its crackdown. In August 2020, Mahmoud Ezzat, the deputy supreme guide who was at that time acting leader of the Brotherhood, was arrested and was subsequently given a life sentence in April 2021. Having suffered a political defeat with the collapse of the Morsi administration within only one year, the Brotherhood is going through a period of introspection and is faced with the issue of who will take over the leadership that has been left vacant as a result of successive arrests. For the time being, it is likely that the Brotherhood will have to focus on organizational reforms that reflect the voice of the younger generation, and on acquiring new members and recovering their ability to mobilize the masses.

Apart from Egypt, the Brotherhood still has branches in other countries around the world, and political parties aligned with the Brotherhood can be found in several countries, including Jordan, Palestine (Gaza), Kuwait, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Sudan (Figure 3). There is a confrontational configuration here, albeit to varying degrees from country to country, with Turkey and Qatar supporting these Islamist parties, while Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt support secular parties.

³ Housam, Darwish (2012). Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: In Between Old and New Challenges. JETRO website. https://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/Publish/Reports/Seisaku/1203_darwish.html (accessed May 31, 2021)

Figure 3: Major political parties in the Middle East aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood



Source: Created by MGSSI based on various information sources

In Sudan, for example, a military coup in 2019 overthrew the Bashir administration and created a transitional secular government, which was then supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The backdrop to this decision is said to have been Saudi and UAE dissatisfaction with the facts that the Bashir administration had strengthened ties with the Brotherhood, had not participated in the severing of diplomatic relations with Qatar in 2017, and in the same year, had ceded a portion of the interests in the Red Sea port of Suakin to Turkey. In addition, Saudi, UAE, and Egyptian media have taken the lead in criticizing the Brotherhood-inspired Ennahda party in Tunisia. In particular, the UAE's support for the secular PDL party, which follows in the tradition of the former Ben Ali administration, is said to be designed to bring about the downfall of Ennahda.

CONCLUSION

For Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, preventing a recurrence of the Arab Spring and deterring the resurgence of the Brotherhood will continue to be security priorities. In Iraq and Lebanon, where the political situation is unstable, and also in Egypt, which is relatively stabilizing, public dissatisfaction with government corruption and the lack of governance remains deep-seated, and the possibility of protest movements reigniting and escalating cannot be ruled out. Should the Brotherhood or another Islamist group seize that opportunity to assert itself, there is the danger that regimes across the Middle East could be shaken or brought down in a domino effect. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, which want to avert that possibility, are likely to continue confronting Turkey and Qatar.

Of course, the bipolar conflict over the Brotherhood is a complex web of interacting factors, including the domestic affairs of the countries concerned, the battle for regional hegemony, economic interests, and the intentions of the US, Russia, and China; it remains fluid from day to day, and may change at any time. As a new development from the beginning of 2021, relations between Turkey and Egypt, which had been steadily deteriorating over their different positions on the Brotherhood, started showing signs of improvement in connection with the territorial dispute over natural gas resources in the eastern Mediterranean⁴. In March 2021, Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu declared that he was ready to reach an agreement with Egypt on

⁴ Turkey is said to be aiming to connect natural gas produced by Cyprus and Israel to Turkey via pipeline. According to reports in various newspapers in March 2021, the Turkish authorities is believed to have requested the country's Egyptian media to refrain from publishing articles critical of Egypt and the Sisi administration, and that the reason behind Turkey's request may be its desire to obtain Egypt's support in the dispute over gas interests in the eastern Mediterranean.

the maritime boundary in the eastern Mediterranean, and the deputy foreign ministers of the two countries have just met in person in early May.

In addition, the UAE, which has adopted a particularly strict stance towards the Brotherhood from an ideological viewpoint, has shown a willingness to compromise, with former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash stating in January that if Turkey were to cut off its support to Muslim Brotherhood, it could recalibrate its relations with Arabs. A rapprochement between the two countries may affect Qatar's position within the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) as well as the power balance between the Arab states and Iran, and all eyes will be on Turkey's next move.

Finally, another focal point to consider for the future is Africa. In particular, the area from the continent's easternmost point known as the Horn of Africa to the Red Sea is a key logistics hub connecting the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean (Figure 4). A competition is developing between Turkey and the oil-producing Gulf Arab states to expand their military and economic influence in the coastal countries of this region, and moves to support the establishment of governments beneficial to themselves in each of these countries is likely to continue in the future. In that context, the presence of the Brotherhood and Islamist groups influenced by its ideology will no doubt emerge as one of the elements of this conflict.

Figure 4: Countries in and around the Horn of Africa



Note: Sudan is also sometimes included in the Horn of Africa.
 Source: Created by MGSSI based on information from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/pr/wakaru/topics/vol78/index.html>) and other sources