

# Tensions Between Egypt and Turkey Are on the Rise

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## Brief Analysis

**E**gypt and Turkey are the two largest countries in the eastern Mediterranean; along with Iran, they make up nearly half of the total population of the Middle East. The two states also possess what are considered the **two strongest conventional military powers** (<https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing-middle-east.asp>) in the Middle East. Moreover, Cairo and Ankara are major centers in the Islamic world: Egypt's Al-Azhar Mosque is the most important Islamic university in the world and a key element of Egyptian soft power, while Turkey's historical connection to the last Islamic Caliphate is regarded with particular nostalgia across the region.

Despite these similarities, a deep-seated conflict between the two countries is currently playing out across the region, though Ankara and Cairo have consistently avoided direct confrontation or hostilities. Tensions between the two have been escalating since the Arab Spring, and are in turn impacting the political situations of Libya, Sudan, and the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition to increasing the likelihood of more direct confrontation between the two countries, Turkish-Egyptian conflict is also threatening the fragile stability of the Middle East, suggesting that an outside mediator is necessary to navigate this thorny issue.

When Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi was ousted in June 2013, Ankara offered the Muslim Brotherhood leadership refuge and protection while waging a media campaign against the new Egyptian government. In response, Egypt gave the Turkish ambassador to Egypt 48 hours to leave the country, beginning a rapid cooling of relations that had been relatively positive during the Morsi era. Turkey's favorable attitude towards the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is based upon ideological similarities between President Erdogan's party (the AKP) and the MB, a fact that has led Ankara—along with Doha—to become a prominent voice in the region against the Egyptian regime.

Due to the two countries' regional influence, Egypt and Turkey's clashing interests are impacting other conflicts in the Middle East as well. In Libya, the two countries are effectively fighting a proxy war: Egypt is supporting Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), while Turkey is aiding his opponent, the Government of National Accord led by Fayeze al-Sarraj. Egypt has in turn accused the Government of National Accord of supporting extremist Islamist militias and providing them with political and military support.

The conflict has become increasingly direct due to Haftar's campaign against Tripoli, with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi having met with General Haftar at least twice in Cairo since the announcement of the campaign in May. Meanwhile, reports indicate that a **Turkish vessel carrying military weapons and equipment** (<https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1252963-تركيا-تمدّد-ميايشيات-طرابلس-بسفينة-محملة-بالأسلحة-والآليات>) originating at the Turkish port of Samsun arrived in the militia-controlled Libyan port of Tripoli immediately after Erdogan released a statement that he would reject the LNA's military push against the capital.

Support for opposing factions is a conflict also playing out in Syria. Egypt has made explicit its support for Assad, breaking with the traditional position of its Gulf allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to do so. For its part, Turkey has served as a main base of support for the armed resistance, though the partial Iranian-Turkish-Russian rapprochement suggests that Turkey is contenting itself with its spheres of influence in Syria, fighting Syria's Kurds without necessarily intending to threaten Assad's authority. Yet it is clear that Cairo will not be satisfied with even this level of continued Turkish influence in Syria. Egyptian officials recently urged its Gulf allies to rally behind Assad and counter Turkish influence, even as the Egyptian foreign minister stated that Egypt would not pose any preconditions for Syria to rejoin the Arab League.

With the recent deposing of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, Egypt and Turkey are once again pursuing conflicting strategies. Al-Bashir had signed an agreement with Erdogan in 2017 allowing Turkey to restore and rehabilitate the strategic island of Suakin in the Red Sea. The island constitutes the closest port to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia and borders Egyptian waters. The Egyptian media saw Turkey's involvement as a step against Egypt due to the proximity of the island to the country's southern border, and raised concerns that Erdogan might use Suakin to support terrorist organizations in carrying out actions hostile to Egypt. Moreover, Suakin would give Turkey a presence in the Red Sea, the main route to Egypt's vital Suez Canal. With the ousting of al-Bashir, there is now some uncertainty surrounding the future of the agreement. Turkey and Egypt are both making considerable efforts to influence either the continuation or annulment of the agreement; the deciding factor will likely be the next president of Sudan.

Meanwhile, Egypt has been making maritime plays in the eastern Mediterranean. In November 2014, Cairo held a tripartite summit between Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus—with the conspicuous absence of Turkey—in order to demarcate the maritime borders in the eastern Mediterranean and to examine the optimal use of promising natural gas prospects between the coasts of Cyprus and Egypt. While the potential of developing the natural gas deposits was certainly appealing, Cairo also pursued the agreement with Cyprus in order to marginalize and weaken the Turkish position in the waters surrounding Cyprus. Turkey does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus's claims to an exclusive economic zone further than twelve miles beyond its territorial waters, and has instead demanded that Turkey should have its own private economic zone in the deep waters of the southeastern Mediterranean—reaching up to Egyptian waters. Nor does Turkey recognize the 2013 maritime boundary delimitation agreement between Egypt and Cyprus, leaving significant portions of eastern Mediterranean contested.

Nevertheless, Egypt has continued to pursue its attempts to develop the natural gas resources in the waters it claims. In January 2019, the energy ministers from Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine met in Cairo to form the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which will be headquartered in Cairo. The Forum aims to strengthen cooperation and dialogue regarding promising natural gas prospects. Turkey was conspicuously not invited to join the forum, and regards the Forum as a threat to its economic interests in the eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey responded through unilateral measures, including an announcement of a major push to drill for gas off the coast of Cyprus starting next September. Though Egypt issued a **strong statement** (<http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-48162127>) from the foreign ministry on May 4, warning Turkey against any unilateral steps on natural gas drilling west of Cyprus, Erdogan has since warned natural gas companies to be careful about drilling off the coast of Cyprus. Meanwhile, the Turkish foreign ministry has insisted that the matter of

drilling rested on “legitimate rights,” with a presumed emphasis on those of Turkey.

The escalating pressure between these two regional players threatens to bring more turmoil to an already turbulent region. Moreover, it puts the interests of the United States at risk: both Turkey and Egypt are longstanding traditional allies of Washington, yet the conflict threatens to push Turkey closer to Iran and Russia even as Russia actively pursues a closer relationship to Egypt. If Washington is looking to avoid an opportunity for both Russia and Iran to strengthen their regional positions, the administration should take steps to mediate between Turkey and Egypt, or at least reduce friction between the two governments’ positions enough to mitigate the likelihood of a confrontation.

Washington is already facing the prospect of comprehensive negotiations with Turkey to resolve the issue of Russia’s ongoing delivery of S-400 system to Ankara. While this incident greatly complicates relations between the two countries, it may provide the chance for Washington propose a number of initiatives to solve the natural gas issue in the eastern Mediterranean during larger discussion. In navigating just this one issue, a significant stressor between Cairo and Ankara would be removed.

Furthermore, U.S. mediation between Ankara and Cairo should be seen as an important component of tackling the Iranian threat to the region. Turkey’s closer relationship with Iran and Russia is perhaps the main obstacle (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/understanding-egypts-limited-involvement-in-the-campaign-against-iran>) to Egypt’s active involvement in the campaign against Iran, as Egypt does not want Iran to side exclusively with Turkey. Egypt’s withdrawal from the Middle East Strategic Alliance, or the ‘Arab NATO’ strategy favored by President Trump, should be understood as an indirect result of the Egyptian-Turkish conflict and Egypt’s sense that it must counterbalance a potential Turkish-Iranian rapprochement. And given that the United States has recently tried to avoid involvement in major military confrontations in the Middle East, it should not give up a chance to mitigate potential conflict between these two countries before it begins outright.

Nevertheless, the core issue driving the enmity between these two nations stems from Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood and remains a problem unlikely to be solved through mediation. Egypt sees Erdogan’s party and the Muslim Brotherhood as essentially two sides of the same coin, while Erdogan sees Sisi’s coup as potentially replicable in Turkey, especially after the failed coup attempt in 2016. President Trump’s recent announcement that he supported designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group, along with recent congressional discussion on the matter, will likely put more pressure on Turkey in this regard. Where that pressure leads, however, remains to be seen. ♦

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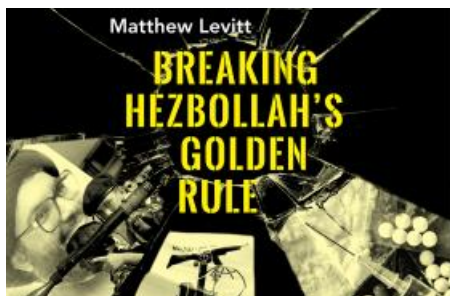
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