

Is Syria involved in corridor war?

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OPINION
EXCLUSIVE

The Middle East has been involved in security-political and military struggles for decades. In fact, it can be said that crisis has become an inseparable part of the identity of this region. Of course, the role of global powers in the region's turmoil should not be overlooked. The interests of global powers are closely related to the Middle East crisis. However, it should be noted that with the increase in oil production in the United States itself in the past few years, the importance of Middle East oil has gradually decreased. That is why the United States has been trying to withdraw from this region. However, it must be honestly admitted that the problems of the Middle East are not just the fault of global powers. Competition between the local powers in this region also plays an important role in the emergence and occurrence of crises.

Development is not possible without considering the role of global powers and the existing rifts in the region. It goes without saying that the Middle East is full of irreparable rifts of different sorts: Ethnic, religious, cultural, etc.

Although all of these issues play a significant role in creating tensions in the Middle East, but in this short article, I will try to examine the current crises from another perspective, from the perspective of the war for corridors.

Corridors play a fundamental role in the development of countries. Europe has always needed the energy of the region, especially after the war in Ukraine. As such, the importance of the Middle East for Europe has increased dramatically. This also adds to the strategic advantage of being located along transit routes.

On the other hand, with the spread of liberal capitalist thinking in all parts of the world, consumer culture has become more prevalent. Cheap goods produced in countries such as China, India, and Vietnam must be transported to other countries all over the world, especially in Europe and America, to reach consumers. So, transit routes of goods becomes fundamental and shapes the global competition.

During the Arab Spring that started in 2011, the old order in the region collapsed. This became another reason why some of the more powerful countries in the Middle East tried to increase their share of the region. For example, Turkey sought to abuse the power vacuum in Syria and dominate the northern region of Syria. Meanwhile, countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates also tried to use the crisis in Syria and Iraq to extend their dominance to these countries to take advantage of the new realities on the ground.

Now that more than 10 years has passed since the Arab Spring, we can go back in time and take a look at Syria and Iraq again through the lens of what was to come. For example, in retrospect, one might notice that ISIS forces and rebel forces supported by Turkey operated in those areas of Syria that were to be rule in the future by

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Opposition fighters drive past tanks abandoned by the Syrian military on the outskirts of Damascus.
● HUSSEIN MALLA/AP

the HTS forces.

My assumption in this article is that the efforts of regional powers to penetrate Syrian territory are mostly to gain a kind of strategic advantage to guide political decisions in the war-torn country. Decisions that for example can be manifested in the construction of new corridors. It should be noted that all these transit projects have within them a logic of regional competition.

In the case of Turkey, I believe that the successful Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline project has led Erdogan to the conclusion that the Development Road project can also be implemented to enhance Turkey's strategic role in the region.

On the other hand, the occupation of territory in Syria by Turkish-backed groups could be a means of pressuring Iran to agree to the Zangezur corridor in Armenia. This corridor could provide a major leap forward for the Turks' position in global transit.

A critical point to note is that Iran and Turkey, as two local powers in the region, are trying to control or build corridors. In the following, I will go into more details of the three corridors that Turkey is interested in.

Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil, gas project

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is a 1,768 km long crude oil pipeline, which starts from the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli oil field in the Caspian Sea and continues to the Mediterranean Sea.

The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline was a strategic move for the Republic of Azerbaijan, aiming to eliminate its dependence on Iran and Russia in the exports of its oil. Despite predictions that the construction of the pipeline would be impractical and impossible, the project was successfully completed in the end. As a result of this project, Azerbaijan's relations with Europe, Turkey, and Georgia were strengthened, and Baku became more confident in its moves in its domestic and foreign affairs.

According to data from the Turkish oil company Botas International, 210,767,244 barrels of crude oil extracted by the Republic of Azerbaijan from the Caspian Sea were transported through this pipeline in 2020. This proved to be a reliable route for transferring energy to the energy-hungry Europe. Of course, the importance of this line has increased sharply after the war in Ukraine.

Turkey-Iraq Development Road

The Development Road project, which runs from Iraq to Turkey and from there to Europe, is one of the multi-purpose regional projects that, if successful, could diminish Iran's geopolitical role.

In an interview with Anadolu Agency, Dr. Farhan Al-Fartousi, director general of the General Company for Ports of Iraq (GCPI), said about the construction of the Faw Grand Port and the Development Road project to which the

port is connected: "These are inseparable and complementary projects. All products that come to this port go to Turkey through the Development Road."

The Faw Grand Port, which is being built by South Korea's Daewoo with a contract worth approximately \$5 billion, is located at the mouth of the Shatt Al-Arab, where the Euphrates and Tigris rivers meet before flowing into the sea. Since the Faw Port has access to open waters, it can host large container ships. The first phase of the port project is expected to be completed and put into operation by the end of 2025. Turkey is also participating in the construction of the large port of Faw.

The development road project will start from the port and extend through Diwaniyah, Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad, and Mosul to the Turkish border. It will include 1,200 kilometers of two-way roads and railways and is intended to access Europe from the Turkish ports of Mersin and Istanbul. The Development Road will be one of the new trade bridges between Asia and Europe.

Zangezur Corridor

According to the Russia in Global Affairs journal, the corridor will run across the 40-kilometer zone of Armenia's Syunik region bordering Iran. The new road corridor is expected to be part of a longer route from Central Asia or China to Turkey and from there to Europe. The new overland

route in the South Caucasus may be connected to the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor. Such logistics promises obvious economic dividends for some countries in the region, while at the same time bearing political constraints that may impede the project's implementation. "Political constraints" refers to Iran's concerns. Iran is concerned about its geopolitical strangulation and therefore opposes the corridor.

As mentioned, Europe needs cheap goods and energy. This increases the importance of corridors. Exploiting the religious and identity rifts in the region, the major powers of the region are trying to influence the territory of other countries to shape the future. On the other hand, this type of influence puts pressure on competitors to change their own political plans. Turkey, despite the opposition of Russia and some other countries in the region, implemented the Baku-Ceyhan project by approaching Azerbaijan.

The Development Road project connecting Iraq to Europe complements the successful Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline project. Both of these corridors (one for energy and the other for goods) will play an important role in enhancing Turkey's geopolitical position. Ultimately, it seems that Turkey has a plan to pressure Iran to drop its opposition to Zangezur by seizing territory in Syria. However, this is no simple matter and will not be said and done.



Workers are constructing the tunnel that will connect Iraq's coastal region to international trade links through Turkey, in al-Faw, Iraq, on February 8, 2024.
● MOHAMMED ATY/REUTERS



Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline
● minenergy.gov.az