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Iran–Turkey Rivalry in the Middle East: The Case of Lebanon

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Iran and Turkey have a long history of rivalry in the Middle East. As two key regional powers, they were vying for influence and seeking to expand their spheres of influence. After WWII both Iran and Turkey had an anti-Soviet attitude and participated in the Central Treaty Organization with the key goal to contain the Soviet Union. The Cold War has halted bilateral competition, while the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran has significantly changed the regional balance of power.

Since the Islamic Revolution, the US has viewed Turkey as leverage in its Iran containment policy. Until the end of the Cold War Turkey was a loyal US ally and a bulwark of NATO both against the Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, Turkey has launched a strategic reassessment of its foreign policy since the ascendance to power of the moderate

Islamist “Justice and Development” (AKP) party. While advocating for EU membership, Turkey, guided by the theoretical thinking of Ahmet Davutoglu, has started to significantly increase its involvement in the Middle East, Balkans, South Caucasus and Central Asia and to redefine its regional role across its neighborhood.

This transformation seemed to be in line with Iranian interests. A more independent Turkey could mean more possibilities for bilateral cooperation and less American influence over Turkish foreign policy. Not surprisingly Turkey, alongside Brazil, were the only UN Security Council members to vote against the June 2010 resolution imposing tough sanctions against Iran despite the US calls to abstain. Another pattern of Turkey’s involvement in the Middle East was its growing rivalry with Saudi Arabia for the leadership role in the Sunni world. In close cooperation with Qatar, Turkey has actively supported the Muslim Brotherhood linked groups in the region. Ankara was a staunch ally of the former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, and it had strongly criticized the 2013 military coup against him. Given the Iran – Saudi Arabia confrontation Turkey’s bid to replace Saudis as a leader in the Sunni world was seemingly in line with Iranian interests. Turkey, under the leadership of Prime Minister and later President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has also faced significant challenges in its relations with Israel, which should have also raised sympathies in Iran.

However, the growing self-reliance of Turkey has also ushered in Turkish assertiveness (not in line with the Iranian interests) and triggered Turkish military interventions in Syria and Libya. Turkey and Iran have been supporting opposing sides in Syria and despite the launch of the Astana process in cooperation with Russia their contradictions remained in place. Syria represents an interesting nexus of Turkish, Russian and Iranian interests, where all three are seeking to balance each other attempting to prevent anyone’s unilateral control over Syria. If Turkey’s strategic goal is to establish control over the Kurdish populated northern parts of Syria and to prevent the creation of another Kurdish autonomy resembling the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, Iran views Syria as a strategic asset in its struggle with Israel as well as a key pillar in the Iran – Iraq – Syria – Lebanon corridor, which allows Iran to project its power in the Levant.

Meanwhile, Lebanon is crucial for furthering Iranian national interests. Iran controls large parts of Lebanon via the pro-Iranian movement Hezbollah, which provides significant leverage against Israel and is of utmost importance for the successful implementation of Iranian policy in Syria. However, in recent months, Lebanon was thrown into a deep political and economic crisis. The staggering devaluation of the Lebanese currency has resulted in significant price hikes and ushered in large scale street protests. This movement forced Lebanese Prime Minister's, Saad Hariri, resignation in late October 2019. In January 2020, a new government was formed by Hassan Diab providing hope for some socio-economic improvement in Lebanon. The Diab government had connections with the Iran-backed Hezbollah movement and was largely perceived as pro-Iranian. However, the global economic meltdown triggered by the Coronavirus pandemic has hardly made the task of the new Lebanese government any easier. The lockdown accelerated the country's economic decline. Businesses have closed and unemployment has spiked as the government has cascaded toward insolvency. In March, it failed to make a \$1.2 billion payment on foreign bonds, the first such default in Lebanon's history. A new wave of anti-government protests erupted across Lebanon in June after the Lebanese pound sank to a new low against the U.S. dollar, obliterating the purchasing power of many Lebanese. People were blocking roads, burning tires and chanting against the political elite amid a deepening economic crisis.

The August 4 devastating blast in the Beirut port yard was the final blow to the Hassan Diab government. Under the tough pressure of a resentful population Diab was forced to declare his resignation on August 10. The international community, led by France, has put forward demands for steep political reforms as a condition for providing humanitarian and economic aid to Lebanon. On August 31, just hours before President Macron's visit to Lebanon, Mustapha Adib, a former ambassador to Germany, was nominated by the President for undertaking the Prime Minister's post. Mr. Adib was supported by key Sunni parties including the Future Movement party of the former Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Meanwhile, Iran got concerned that, because of those reforms, Hezbollah might lose its leadership position in the country.

Recently, Turkey has made steps to increase its involvement in Lebanon while seeking to replace Saudi Arabia as the main backer of the Sunni population, and to strengthen its positions in

Northern Lebanon. Turkey has made efforts to establish contacts with Saad Hariri, a former Prime Minister and a key Lebanese politician. The growing Turkish influence in Lebanon was marked by some anti-Armenian protests organized by pro-Turkish groups in mid June 2020. Thus, Lebanon, after Syria and Libya, could become another prospective battleground for Turkey's aspirations to increase its influence in the MENA region. Given Egypt's and UAE's active involvement in Libya, where they sought countering the growing Turkish influence, Lebanon might soon be transformed into another hotspot between Turkey and the Arab states. However, the deepening chaos and possible significant changes to the government system in Lebanon should also concern Iran as it might jeopardize the functioning of the Iran - Iraq - Syria - Lebanon land corridor. Given the Syrian experience, the growth of Turkish influence in Lebanon might ultimately not be in line with vital Iranian interests. Tehran should strategically reassess its options in Lebanon and, in this context, the partnership between Hezbollah and the Armenian community might serve as a sound base to making Armenians and Iran natural allies in their mutual interest to counter an increasing role of Turkey in Lebanon.