



Diwan

New Sultan on the Block

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Turkish influence is increasing in Lebanon, where many Sunnis are looking for a regional patron.

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Comments (4)

On July 4, Lebanese Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmi announced that four citizens, two Syrians and two Turks, had been arrested as they attempted to smuggle \$4 million dollars into Lebanon on a flight from Turkey. He claimed that the money was meant to finance “violent street movements,” and that “instructions” had been sent from Turkey via the WhatsApp application to members of the anti-government protest movement in the country

Fahmi was not the only politician to refer to the growing Turkish role in Lebanon. A website affiliated with a former interior minister, Nouhad al-Mashnouq, published a full list of allegedly pro-Turkish nongovernmental organizations and mosques. It claimed that Turkey was planning “to occupy Tripoli,” Lebanon’s second largest city and a Sunni Muslim stronghold in the country.

These claims of a Turkish role or conspiracies in Lebanon are difficult to substantiate, as Ankara, unlike Iran and Saudi Arabia, hasn’t actively pursued a political agenda in the country. Nor does it have political allies in parliament or government. Iran has Hezbollah, with its political influence and militia, while Saudi Arabia has sway over some of the largest blocs in parliament, from former prime minister Sa’d Hariri’s Future Movement to the Christian Lebanese Forces. Turkey is nowhere to be found in Lebanon’s political institutions.

However, the Turks have been slowly but consistently building up networks and establishing ties with Sunni communities across Lebanon on different levels. The announcement last week that Turkey had discovered a new gas field in the Black Sea could potentially bring more resources to such efforts. First, Ankara is continuing to work on strengthening cultural and ethnic links with Lebanon by

providing scholarships, engaging in cultural activities, and granting citizenship to thousands of Lebanese. Since President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Beirut in November 2010, Turkey has invested in rehabilitating Ottoman-era symbols, among them the Tripoli train station of the historical Hijaz railway. It has also opened cultural centers where thousands of people are learning Turkish.

A Turkish priority is also the revival of Turkmen identity. Until Turkey showed interest in the community more than a decade ago, the Turkmen minority of several thousand people, scattered between northern and eastern Lebanon, had lost much of its connection to Turkey. Today, residents of marginalized Turkmen towns say they feel the presence of the Turkish state far more than they do that of the Lebanese state. Turkey organizes regular diplomatic visits and funds projects through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency. Many thousands of Syrian Turkmen also reside in Lebanon.

In addition to development projects, the granting of citizenship has become a major Turkish endeavor. Thousands of Lebanese, many of whom are Turkmen or claim Turkish origins, have received Turkish nationality. Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu declared recently, while on a visit to Beirut following the catastrophic explosion in Beirut Port, that Erdoğan had instructed him to provide any Lebanese Turkmen or those of Turkish origin with citizenship.

According to semiofficial numbers, until 2019 almost 18,000 Lebanese had applied for Turkish citizenship, and just over 9,600 had received it. Not all applicants were ethnically Turkish or Turkmen, as many Lebanese are attracted to Turkey due to its stability, lifestyle, and visa waiver program with Lebanon. Turkey's soft power, mostly due to popular Turkish television series and Erdoğan's populist politics, has strongly impacted many Lebanese. Among them are Sunnis longing for a new source of pride given Iran's influence in the Levant, particularly among Shi'a communities.

Nevertheless, Turkey's growing clout in the Sunni community has had negative repercussions on Lebanese intercommunal relations. Ankara has sought to whitewash and glorify Ottoman history through funded lectures, even though this has been controversial in Lebanon. For example, Turkey's network of supporters has sought to intimidate Armenians commemorating the anniversary of their genocide in 1915. Since Erdoğan's trip to Beirut, Armenians have been increasingly under pressure as thousands of pro-Turkish protesters have shown up at their rallies waving Turkish flags and chanting threatening slogans, often calling for another genocide.

Such actions are not restricted to rallies. Turkey's supporters recently intimidated an Armenian television journalist who criticized Erdoğan on a live show. The ensuing attacks were remarkable, with videos, threats, and insults directed against the Armenian community. The number of Armenians in Lebanon is dwindling as many are opting to leave, given the changing tide in a country normally sympathetic to their cause. The Armenian example highlights a worrying aspect of Turkey's growing clout: Many Lebanese minorities share a mostly traumatic and unfavorable view of the Ottoman era.

Another aspect of Turkish influence in Lebanon is how Turkey has integrated domestic issues into its actions in the country. Recently, Turkish officials mentioned Eren Bülbül, a fifteen-year-old boy killed by the Kurdistan Workers Party in 2017, as an inspiration for a relief effort after a major explosion at Beirut Port on August 4. Such references are mainly intended for Turkish audiences.

Internal priorities were also behind Turkey's pursuit in Lebanon of supporters of Fethullah Gülen, a strong rival of Erdoğan who lives in exile, despite their scant presence. Following the failed July 15, 2016, coup attempt and the crackdown on the Gülenist network in Turkey and elsewhere, Ankara mobilized its supporters in Lebanon and forced a Lebanese cleric with alleged links to Gülen to resign from his position as head of a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Quranic school in western Beirut. According to three individuals familiar with the case, the school had a partnership with the Gülenist

network but was not affiliated with it. Such intervention, while it showed Ankara's reach and capability, also demonstrated a narrow-minded approach that failed to take into consideration broader Turkish interests.

Turkey's investments in Lebanon are ongoing and span the Sunni community. A Turkish hospital is to be inaugurated soon in the city of Sidon. Thousands of Turkish university scholarships have been distributed, making Turkey among the top countries in Lebanon providing aid for higher education.

So far, Turkey has refrained from supporting a single political party, such as Lebanon's version of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Jama'a Islamiyya. This is perhaps aimed at remaining above partisan politics and retaining popular support among a wide cross-section of the Sunni community. In fact, Turkey's influence and Erdoğan's support base extends to Kurdish and Arab populations that migrated from Turkey and were granted Lebanese citizenship in the 1990s. Some of these groups maintain a strong connection to Turkey.

Some Lebanese politicians have also established relations with Turkey, including former prime minister Sa'd Hariri, who was a witness at the marriage of Erdoğan's daughter. However, the growing hostility between Turkey and Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt will make it difficult for certain politicians, Hariri among them, to maintain such relationships. Erdoğan's security chief and confidante, Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization, has also built strong ties with Lebanon's director general of General Security, 'Abbas Ibrahim, an increasingly influential figure in the country.

Nonetheless, Turkey has not directly intervened in Lebanon's politics. However, that might change after the Beirut Port explosion. French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Lebanon in its aftermath and his initiative to end the political deadlock in the country were partly seen as an effort to prevent Turkey from establishing another foothold on the Mediterranean. Macron connected Lebanon and Libya in a tweet about a phone call with U.S. President Donald Trump, in a direct reference to Turkish actions in both countries. The United Arab Emirates and Egypt, both of them rivals of Turkey, have played a part in advancing the Macron initiative in Lebanon, and received a rebuke from Erdoğan, in which he referred to France's attempt to restore its colonial-era influence. Turkish media have also warned against a perceived new French role in Lebanon.

While Turkey's engagement in Libya and Syria already represent significant commitments, there seems to be growing Turkish interest to also focus on Lebanon. If that continues, Turkey will have local support to build upon among Sunnis in search of a patron.

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