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WORKING PAPER

# IS TURKEY A SHAPER AND MOVER IN LEBANON?

Myths and realities about  
Turkey's role and influence

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**Jana J. Jabbour, PhD**

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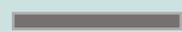
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***WORKING PAPER***

# **IS TURKEY A SHAPER AND MOVER IN LEBANON?**

**Myths and realities about  
Turkey's role and influence**



**Jana J. Jabbour, PhD**

**Political Scientist, Professor at Sciences Po Paris**

**Associate Fellow, AUB Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy  
and International Affairs**

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
Turkey’s Newfound Interest in Lebanon: Symptom of a Rising Power’s Quest for “Strategic Depth” in its Neighborhood .....	6
Multidimensional and Multi-Track Diplomacy at the Service of Ankara’s Quest for Influence in Lebanon .....	7
Who does Ankara Support in Lebanon and Why? .....	8
The Sunni Community: The Main Target of Turkey’s Lebanon Policy .....	8
Lebanon’s Neglected North: Turkey’s Favorite Playing Field .....	9
Conquering Hearts and Minds Through “Humanitarian Diplomacy” .....	9
The Revival of Turkmen Identity .....	10
Soft Power or Turkey’s Power of Seduction .....	13
Factoring in Trade and Energy Interests: Lebanon as Part of Turkey’s EastMed Equation	14
Turkey’s Economic Diplomacy in Lebanon .....	14
EastMed Energy Resources: Lebanon as Experimental Field of Turkey’s “Blue Homeland” Doctrine .....	15
Lebanon: Playground of Turkey’s Political Rivalry with other Regional Powers .....	17
Bitter Friendship: Turkey’s Ambiguous Relation with Iran-Backed Hezbollah .....	17
Lebanon: Playing Field of the Turkish-Saudi Cold War.....	19
A Critical Assessment of Turkey’s Real Power Capacities in Lebanon: Limits of an Emergent Regional Power in a Fragmented State.....	19
Turkey Entrapped in Lebanon’s Communitarian Fault Lines .....	20
Turkey’s Limited Influence at Lebanon’s State/Institutional Level.....	20
Conclusion: Turkey’s Overachievement Problem .....	21
References.....	22

## Introduction

In recent months, Turkey has been the subject of a heated debate in Lebanon. Ankara's proactive and multidimensional diplomacy toward Lebanon, which has materialized in the consolidation of bilateral political ties, the strengthening of economic relations and trade, and the provision of humanitarian and development aid, have raised the profile of Ankara in Lebanon and put the country under the spotlight. The significant expansion of Turkey's footprint in Lebanon has stirred up controversy over the country's real aims and intentions. While some prominent political and media figures welcome Turkey's engagement in Lebanon—perceiving it through the lens of a regional power's support for a “small state” and considering it in the interest of Lebanon—others suspect Ankara of being driven by imperialist neo-ottoman ambitions, and warn of Turkey's “hidden agenda” in Lebanon. Rumors about Turkey's growing influence have also generated security fears as media reports alleged that Turkey is shipping weapons to Lebanon's north, in an attempt to arm extremist groups and create chaos in the country (Al Arabiya, 2020).

Hence, it is legitimate to ask: what role does Turkey actually play and aims to play in Lebanon? What is Turkey's “great plan”, if any, for Lebanon? What is real and what is fantasy when it comes to Turkey's power and influence in Lebanon?

This paper attempts to make sense of Turkey's interest and role in Lebanon. It examines the drivers of Turkish foreign policy toward Lebanon, elucidating the rationale behind Ankara's assertiveness and active engagement in the last years. It provides an assessment of what Turkey has thus far achieved, the obstacles and limits it encounters in asserting itself as a regional power, and a key player in the Lebanese arena. Contrary to general perception, the paper contends that despite stepping up initiatives in Lebanon, Turkey has thus far failed to take up a leading role. Turkey's real power-capacity pales in comparison to other regional powers active in Lebanon.

## Turkey's Newfound Interest in Lebanon: Symptom of a Rising Power's Quest for "Strategic Depth" in its Neighborhood

The 2000s can be considered as a foundational period for Turkish-Lebanese relations. In fact, for decades, Turkish foreign policy has neglected Lebanon, which was viewed as a small state where Ankara had limited interest. According to a former Turkish diplomat, "in the 1980s and 1990s, when an ambassador was appointed to Lebanon, he would see it as a demotion in his career as Beirut was not seen as an 'important' capital."<sup>1</sup> Yet, the 2000s mark a shift in Ankara's position vis-à-vis Lebanon. Under the Justice and Development party's rule (AKP), and in particular during Ahmet Davutoğlu's mandate as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey (2009-2014), Lebanon gained a new significance for Turkish foreign policy, as it was part and parcel of Turkey's "strategic depth" doctrine. Formulated by Ahmet Davutoğlu in the early 2000s, the doctrine advocates for a proactive, multidimensional foreign policy in the Middle East/North Africa region, with the aim of expanding Turkey's influence in its neighborhood, allowing it to emerge as a regional power and a "pivot actor" in the international system. The doctrine emphasized the need for "good neighborhood diplomacy" with the Arab world—famously coined as "zero problems with the neighbors" policy—based on common historical and cultural ties between Turkey and the Arab region, and on a promise of empowerment and renaissance of the MENA region via Turkey's leadership.<sup>2</sup>

As Lebanon and Turkey share a common history (Lebanon was part of the Ottoman Empire) and common culture (through Islam and the Oriental/Mediterranean civilization), Ankara saw in Lebanon a potential new sphere of influence in the framework of the implementation of the "strategic depth" doctrine. Hence, in the 2000s, and in particular since the Syrian forces' withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2005, Turkey has deployed an active foreign policy toward the country. Ankara pursues three main objectives in Lebanon: expanding its influence with the view of becoming a key player in Lebanon, on equal footing with other regional powers present in the country; containing Iran by counter-balancing Hezbollah's influence; and securing energy interests in the context of the recent oil and gas discoveries in the EastMed.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview of the author with a Turkish diplomat speaking under conditions of anonymity. Ankara, April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik [Strategic Depth]*, Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari, 2001. [An Arabic translation is available under the title "al umq al istratiji: mawqe' turkiya 'ala al saha al dawlyya, Doha: Al Jazeera, 2017].

## Key Political Interventions of Turkey in Lebanon

- During the Israel-Lebanon war, Ankara played a proactive role in trying to bring about a ceasefire.
- Ankara contributed to finding a solution to the political crises which erupted in 2006 that ended with the signing of the Doha Agreement in 2008 and the election of General Michel Sleiman as President.
- Following the UN Security Council Resolution 1701 which established UNIFIL, Turkey has actively participated in this peacekeeping and monitoring mission.
- Turkey also contributes financially to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which was established through UN Security Council Resolution 1757 and is mandated with the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the 14 February 2005 assassination of late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

## Multidimensional and Multi-Track Diplomacy at the Service of Ankara's Quest for Influence in Lebanon

While a number of Turkish initiatives toward Lebanon were launched in the early 2000s, signaling Turkey's new interest in the country, Ankara's Lebanon policy gains breadth and depth in the late 2000s following the appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu as Minister of Foreign Affairs in May 2009. In July 2009, he makes an official visit to Lebanon where he declares, "Turks and the Lebanese (...) are bound together by deep rooted, historical ties. They have lived together for centuries and today, they continue to share the same geography, face the same challenges and opportunities. Their common vision of peace and stability in the Middle East and prosperity for their peoples has drawn them even closer," adding, "Turkey recognizes the importance and role of [Lebanon] in the Middle East region."<sup>3</sup> A year later, in November 2010, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan traveled to Beirut where he announced Turkey's ambition of creating a free trade zone that includes Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, and Jordan, and of establishing visa-free travel arrangements for the people living in the "Levant" area (bilad al sham), a project famously coined "Shamgen space", by analogy to the European Union Schengen area. Erdoğan also addressed a rally of a few thousand Lebanese in the northern town of Koweyshra, where he expressed Ankara's support for the stability and socio-economic development of Lebanon.

Since then, Turkey has implemented an active and multidimensional foreign policy in Lebanon with the aim of expanding its influence in the country, emerging as a key player. Turkey's Lebanon policy is based on three pillars: building networks of supporters within the Sunni community; conquering hearts and minds through soft power; consolidating bilateral trade and reinforcing Lebanon's economic dependence on Turkey.

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<sup>3</sup> Article by Ahmet Davutoğlu published in the Daily Star, 31 July 2009, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/article-by-h\\_e\\_-ahmet-davutoglu-published-in-daily-star-newspaper-lebanon-on-31-july-2009.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/article-by-h_e_-ahmet-davutoglu-published-in-daily-star-newspaper-lebanon-on-31-july-2009.en.mfa)

# Who does Ankara Support in Lebanon and Why?

## The Sunni Community: The Main Target of Turkey's Lebanon Policy

In an effort to strengthen its foothold in Lebanon, Turkey has sought to forge solid ties with the Sunni community across the country. Ankara's "Sunni" policy in Lebanon plays out at two levels: at the political/state-level, where Ankara has focused on building solid relations with the dominant Sunni party, the Future Movement (Al Mustaqbal), headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri; and at the grassroots level, where Turkey has embraced a "peoples-centered" diplomacy, aiming to promote the socio-economic welfare of Sunni-majority areas through the provision of humanitarian and development aid.

Turkey's choice of building relations with the Future Movement rests on pragmatic calculations, as the Future is viewed as the strongest Sunni party, both in terms of popular support, and of influence over state institutions and the policy-making process. Hence, through building solid ties with the Future, Ankara has sought access to, and influence over, the Lebanese political scene. In a way, the Future Movement is perceived in Ankara as Turkey's gateway to Lebanese politics and institutions, while the head of the party, PM Saad Hariri, is perceived as the most credible/predictable Sunni leader in Lebanon, and, therefore, the most reliable partner for Ankara<sup>4</sup>. According to sources in the AKP Party's foreign relations committee, other prominent Sunni figures in Lebanon are disqualified from being potential partners for Ankara for three main reasons: a) they enjoy limited support and popularity within their Sunni community; b) they do not demonstrate a willingness to exercise national leadership and endorse an influential role beyond their local circle, such as seeking the position of premiership; and/or c) they are (or are perceived by Ankara) as too close to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the current cold war for the leadership of the Sunni world that opposes Turkey to Saudi Arabia and the UAE<sup>5</sup>. In all three scenarios, Ankara considers that it is not in its interest to politically "invest" in such figures.

The AKP has managed to establish both institutional and personal ties with the Future Movement. At the institutional level, relations are strong between the AKP and Al Mustaqbal, and the two parties meet regularly through members' delegation visits. Al Mustaqbal even appointed a permanent representative in Ankara, who acts as a focal point for the AKP and whose mission is to consolidate relations between the two parties. Personally, Erdoğan developed cordial and friendly relations with Saad Hariri, so much so that he invited Hariri to be a witness at his daughter's marriage. Hariri used his political connection with Ankara to ease up his business activities in Turkey, acquiring shares in Turk Telekom, Turkey's former state-owned telecom company.

At the grassroots level, Turkey's Lebanon policy has targeted two groups: disadvantaged people among the Sunni community, in particular in the North, and "kinship" communities—the Turkmens living in the northern villages of Kowayshra and Aydamoun (district of Akkar). Overall, Ankara has invested in two domains: the socioeconomic empowerment of the marginalized Sunnis through the

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with Turkish MPs and advisors to the President, under condition of anonymity.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with the author, March 3, 2021.

provision of development aid and capacity-building projects, and the reawakening of ethnic sentiment among the Turkmen community. In both cases, the objective is to expand its influence by conquering hearts and minds.

## Lebanon's Neglected North: Turkey's Favorite Playing Field

In Turkey's Lebanon policy, the North occupies a central place. The North suffers from political marginalization—power is centralized in Beirut at the expense of the second capital, Tripoli—and from socioeconomic deprivation; Tripoli being the poorest city on the Mediterranean. In addition, in the northern parts of the country, whose development and welfare remain a low priority for Lebanese authorities, Turkey can capitalize on the people's sense of nostalgia for an idealized Ottoman past when their ancestors lived in dignity and relative economic prosperity. Taking pride that their city was a regional capital until the end of the 19th century, during the Ottoman occupation, some Tripolitans have, in recent years, revived the name Trâblus-Şam (Tarablos al-Sham), the name of the province of the Ottoman Empire that stretched from Latakia (in today's Syria) to Maameltein in Lebanon that was centered on Tripoli (1579–1864). What's more, many residents of the northern parts of Lebanon are of Turkish descent, and as such show high levels of sympathy for Turkey.<sup>6</sup>

## Conquering Hearts and Minds Through “Humanitarian Diplomacy”

Northern Lebanon's particular context made it a natural playing field for Turkey, and an easy point of entry from which to weigh in on the Lebanese scene. Ankara sought to consolidate its presence and expand influence in Tripoli and the North (Akkar region), essentially through “peoples-centered” humanitarian diplomacy. In recent years, and as part of its rising power diplomacy (Jabbour, 2017), Turkey has positioned itself as an emergent donor in the international development assistance agenda, and as a pioneer in “south-south cooperation”, a new approach in global development. Lebanon has directly benefitted from this policy. In total, between 2010 and 2020, Turkey spent 33 million USD in development aid on Lebanon<sup>7</sup>. Turkish aid came in the form of establishing irrigation networks, digging water wells<sup>8</sup>, equipping hospitals, furnishing universities and schools, and restoring buildings and heritage sites in Tripoli dating back to the Ottoman era, like the large clock tower in the central Al-Tall square, a gift from Sultan Abdul-Hamid II to the city in 1901, or the Mawlawiya, an old Sufi hospice located alongside Nahr Abou Ali river.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Turkmens residing in the villages of Aydamoun and Koaychra (district of Akkar), there are families in Tripoli who are of Turkish descent such as: Istanbuli, Mawlawi, Chalabi, Darwiche, Turkmeni, Arnaouti, Kendaqji, Jabakhanji, Tahsildar, Sanjeqdar, Defterdar, Ramazan, Yagmour, and Sultan.

<sup>7</sup> Total amount of aid provided through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). Almost half of this amount (roughly 20 million USD) was dedicated for the funding of a Turkish Hospital in Saida. Data provided by the Turkish embassy in Lebanon.

<sup>8</sup> In the context of the “North Lebanon Clean Water Infrastructure Project”, implemented in the northern villages of Aydamun, Kowayshra, and Bireh.

Turkey's development aid also took the form of capacity-building projects, aiming at empowering local populations, in particular youth and women, to launch their own businesses and entrepreneurial activities.<sup>9</sup>

In providing this aid, Turkey resorted to “multi-track diplomacy”, engaging a variety of state and non-state actors. In particular, Ankara mobilized the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), the main governmental actor in charge of the provision of foreign aid,<sup>10</sup> the Turkish Red Crescent, as well as NGOs, the most prominent of which is the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), a conservative NGO close to the ruling AKP party.

Through such “humanitarian diplomacy”, the Turks sought to uphold a discourse of solidarity and compassion with those who suffer the most. Most importantly, in delivering development aid and humanitarian assistance, Ankara promoted a new approach to global aid: it presented itself as a developing country of the South—like Lebanon—and insisted that its aid is offered unconditionally in the name of the brotherhood between Turks and Lebanese and in the name of “south-south cooperation”. Ankara therefore sought to distinguish itself from Western countries, whose aid provision occurs in the framework of “north-south cooperation” and is generally perceived by local populations as a form of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism.

In the last two years, Turkey's aid and assistance has become more visible, filling the void left by Riyadh. The withdrawal of Saudi Arabia, traditionally the most influential Sunni power in Lebanon, has paved the way for other regional powers like Turkey to take up a leadership role and appear as the new patron and Godfather of the Sunnis. In a sense, Ankara's aid gradually emerged as a substitute to Riyadh's checkbook diplomacy, although Turkey has not succeeded in replacing its Saudi rival, at least for now.

Thanks to its humanitarian diplomacy, Turkey gained great visibility in depressed Sunni areas. In Bab al-Tebbaneh or Beddawi in the North, giant pictures of the Turkish president adorn walls and facades, with laudatory slogans. Erdoğan is presented as a real za'eem, who takes up the cause of the impoverished and disenfranchised people.

## The Revival of Turkmen Identity

In parallel to conquering hearts and minds through the provision of development aid, Turkey has sought to entrench its presence and influence in Lebanon through the revival of Turkmen identity. Lebanon counts around 19,000 ethnically Turkish people (Turkmens) scattered between the North (the villages of Kowayshra, Aydamun, and Bireh in the district of Akkar) and the East (Baalbek area). For long neglected by Turkey, these Turkmens were integrated into Lebanon and had lost much of their connection to Turkey. Yet, in the 2000s, and in the context of Davutoğlu's “strategic depth doctrine”, the Turkmen community gained new significance for Turkish foreign policy. Turkmens were in fact seen as a potential lever of influence for Ankara, expanding its footprint and serving its interest in foreign countries. The importance the ruling AKP devoted to Turkmens was shown when it established in 2010 a new institution, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı [YTB]), whose stated mission is to improve the welfare of Turks living in foreign countries as well as kinship communities (people of Turkish

<sup>9</sup> For instance, the setup of a mobile marketplace for small farmers and unemployed women in Akkar and Chouf.

<sup>10</sup> TIKA recently opened an office in Tripoli.

descent, Turkmens), and to build their capacity to “act collectively and participate in the public life of their host country” so as to “consolidate Turkey’s influence abroad”<sup>11</sup>. In a way, Turkmens residing in foreign countries were viewed as the “voices” of Ankara abroad, and an essential means to serve its policy and ambitions.

Starting in the late 2000s, Turkey heavily invested in the Turkmens of Lebanon. In July 2009, two months after his nomination as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu made an official visit to the Turkmen villages of Kowayshra and Aydamun, where he declared, in a public rally, Turkey’s solidarity with its community living in Lebanon, and promised aid to Lebanon’s Turkmens to enhance their socioeconomic welfare. A year later, in 2010, the people of Kowayshra warmly welcomed then-Prime Minister Erdoğan, who pledged to invest in the development of this remote area.

Turkey’s aid to Turkmen villages is centered on infrastructure development projects (digging of water wells, provision of drinking water, building of town halls, and other), as well as projects aimed at reawakening the ethnic sentiment and reviving the connection to Turkey among the Turkmen community. In this regard, Turkey funded through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) the construction of schools in Kowayshra, Aydamoun, and Bireh, licensed by the Lebanese government and managed by Lebanese Turkmens.

Ankara’s investment in the Turkmen community allowed it to gain significant influence and clout. Residents of marginalized Turkmen villages feel grateful for Turkey and have gained pride in their ethnic identity. As one resident of Aydamun puts it: “Turkey is our protector and President Erdoğan is our reference (marja’iyya) and leader (za’eem). We feel valued and respected when Turkish officials pay us a visit. What a pride to know that we matter for a great country like Turkey!”<sup>12</sup>

Turkmens’ newly found sense of pride in their ethnic identity translates into loyalty and political support for Turkey. This is evidenced by the giant photos of the “ra’ees” Erdoğan that adorn the entrances of Turkmen villages, the Turkish flags that hang on balconies, as well as the billboards showing the motto “Shukran Turkiya” (Thank you, Turkey). Everything seems to indicate that these areas are a major “hinterland” for Turkey.

In addition to providing humanitarian aid and reviving Turkmen identity, the granting of citizenship has become a major Turkish endeavor in Lebanon. According to official sources , there are 18,605 Turks registered at the Turkish Consulate in Beirut.<sup>13</sup> While the number of Lebanese citizens who have acquired Turkish citizenship in recent years is undisclosed, official sources do not deny that Turkey has been granting citizenship to those who apply for it, although the conditions and requirements are hard. To date, most of the Lebanese citizens who acquired Turkish citizenship are “Mardinis”, a term that Turkish officials use to refer to descendants of Turks, who emigrated from the city of Mardin to Lebanon and Syria in the wake of WWII to escape compulsory military service in Turkey. Having been discharged of Turkish citizenship, they assimilated to Lebanon and acquired the Lebanese nationality. Mainly residents of the North, their descendants (third

<sup>11</sup> YTB website: <https://www.ytb.gov.tr/en>

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the author, 22 February 2021.

<sup>13</sup> The total number of Turkish citizens in Lebanon, including those not registered at the Consulate, is estimated at 30.000.

generation) were able to apply for Turkish citizenship and re-acquire it, thanks to an amendment of the Turkish Citizenship Law in 2010.

On the wake of the Beirut blast in August 2020, and during his official visit to Beirut, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu announced that based on President Erdoğan's instruction, his government is ready to provide Turkish citizenship to Lebanon's Turkmen population. "We stand with our kin, the Turks and Turkmens in Lebanon and around the world. We will grant Turkish citizenship to our brothers who say, 'I am Turkish, I am Turkmen,' and express their desire to become a citizen," he vowed.<sup>14</sup>

The strategy of granting citizenship seems to payoff: during Turkey's last presidential elections (2018), 96% of the Turks in Lebanon voted for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the highest score achieved in votes cast abroad.

### Brief History of the Turkmen Presence in Lebanon

The Turkmen presence in Lebanon dates back to the 12th century: the Mamluks, who ruled over the region of Mount Lebanon, recruited soldiers of Turkmen origin in their army and deployed them in strategic places (Keserwan, for example) in order to be able to better control the region. In 1516, the Turkmens participated alongside the Ottomans in the battle of Marj Dabiq and then in the Egypt Campaign led by Sultan Selim I. As a reward for their efforts and loyalty, the Sultan offered them land in Lebanon and encouraged them to settle there permanently in order to provide the Sublime Porte with information on potential activities against the Empire, and to facilitate logistics for future campaigns. Later, in the 19th century, other Turkmens—known as "muhacirler" (emigrants)—fled the island of Crete to take refuge in Lebanon, following the defeat of the Ottomans in the war between the Empire and Greece in 1897.

*For a more detailed historical account of the Turkmen presence in Lebanon, see Veysel Ayhan and Özlem Tür, *Lübnan Sorunu ve Türkiye: Savaş, Barış ve Direniş* [The Lebanese question and Turkey: war, peace, and resistance], Bursa: Dora Publications, 2009; and Oytun Orhan, *The Forgotten Turks: Turkmens of Lebanon*, ORSAM Working Paper, 2010.*

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<sup>14</sup> "Turkey ready to provide more aid to Lebanon, Vice President Oktay says", Daily Sabah. 8 August 2020 <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkey-ready-to-provide-more-aid-to-lebanon-vice-president-oktay-says/news>

## Soft Power or Turkey's Power of Seduction

As was the case toward the rest of the Arab region, Turkey sought to consolidate influence in Lebanon by projecting “soft power”. Ankara’s charm offensive in Lebanon has played out at two levels: the general public, and the elites.

A key lever of Turkish soft power in Lebanon, and in the region more broadly, is popular culture embodied by the Turkish TV series. By massively exporting soap operas (“musalsalat”), Turkey managed to seduce the Lebanese public and to deeply penetrate hearts and minds. The unprecedented success of the first Turkish series “Noor” (Gümüş in its original name) during Ramadan 2006 sparked a boom in dubbed Turkish dramas. More than a hundred Turkish TV series have been exported to Lebanon since. Their popularity encouraged Lebanese to visit Turkey, some travel agencies proposing packages that include a tour of the locations where the top TV series were shot, like the luxurious villa on the Bosphorus where the series Noor was shot. It is worth noting that the soap operas were neither produced nor exported by the Turkish government. They are the work of private companies who produced and exported them with the sole objective of doing business and making profit. Yet, as the series became popular in Lebanon and the Arab region, they served Ankara’s soft power and increased its prestige among the general public.<sup>15</sup>

In parallel to appealing to the Lebanese “street” through popular culture, Turkey launched soft power initiatives targeting the elites. By opening offices of the Yunus Emre Institute in Beirut and Tripoli, Ankara sought to shape a Turcophone elite—even more so, a Turcophile elite—who is attracted to Turkish culture and civilization and has positive perceptions of Turkey. In fact, the Institute offers Turkish language courses and regularly hosts cultural events aiming to familiarize the Lebanese public with Turkey (movie screenings, theater plays, concerts, and public conferences).

Simultaneously, the Turkish government established an international scholarship program, Türkiye Burslari, managed by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). According to figures provided by YTB, in total 375 Lebanese students at the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels have benefitted from full Turkish scholarships since the 1990s. Although this number is strikingly low, the impact of Turkey’s educational aid is nonetheless quite visible. Lebanese graduates of Turkey either seek a job there or return to their home country, where they maintain a strong connection with Turkey. The author’s field research shows that many among those graduates founded or sought membership in “Turkish-Lebanese Friendship Associations”, a network of pro-Turkish civil society organizations (NGOs), established in Lebanon with the aim of reinforcing Turkish-Lebanese ties and promoting people-to-people interactions between Turks and Lebanese.<sup>16</sup> Very often, when Turkey comes under attack, these NGOs side with Ankara and promote Turkey’s agenda and interests, thus acting willingly or unwillingly as Turkey’s “voices” and spokesperson in Lebanon.

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<sup>15</sup> Jana Jabbour, “An illusionary power of seduction? An assessment of Turkey’s cultural power in the Arab world in light of its audio-visual presence in the region”, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 21, 2015 <http://ejts.revues.org/5234>

<sup>16</sup> There are, to date, around ten Turkish-Lebanese Friendship Associations: Tripoli, Akkar district (Kowayshra and Aydamun), Beirut, and Saida.

A recent case in point can be found in the diplomatic crisis between Ankara and Beirut on the centenary of Greater Lebanon's establishment, in September 2019. On this occasion, President Michel Aoun delivered a speech whereby he held the Ottomans responsible for oppression in Lebanon, stating: "All attempts at liberation from the Ottoman yoke were met with violence, killings, and the sowing of sectarian discord," adding, "the state terror practiced by the Ottomans against the Lebanese people, especially during WWI, caused hundreds of thousands of victims between famine, conscription, and forced labor."<sup>17</sup> Supporters of President Aoun and his party (Free Patriotic Movement) then defaced a Turkish flag and hung it on the gates of the Turkish embassy in Rabieh. When tensions escalated between Ankara and Beirut, and the Turkish Foreign Ministry summoned the Lebanese ambassador to Ankara to condemn the incident and Aoun's speech, Turkish-Lebanese Friendship Associations and other pro-Turkish NGOs in Lebanon were mobilized to show support for Turkey. They organized rallies in Beirut and Tripoli where they waved Turkish flags and chanted pro- Erdoğan and pro-Turkish slogans. What's more, five lawyers close to these NGOs filed a legal complaint at the Beirut prosecutor's office against the perpetrators of the incident in front of the Turkish embassy in Rabieh, accusing them of "harming and disrupting the Lebanese relations with friendly Turkey".

Hence, Turkey's soft power initiatives in Lebanon have a political impact: by offering scholarships to Lebanese students and nurturing pro-Turkish NGOs, Ankara ends up creating networks of loyalists in Lebanon, who support Turkey in turbulent times.

## Factoring in Trade and Energy Interests: Lebanon as Part of Turkey's EastMed Equation

### Turkey's Economic Diplomacy in Lebanon

Turkey's footprint in Lebanon is heavily based on the economic and trade links that Ankara has managed to forge with the country since the 2000s. Given that the "strategic depth" doctrine rested on a liberal understanding of international relations, Turkey has sought to consolidate its presence in Lebanon through economic interdependence. Following then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's official visit to Lebanon on November 24, 2010 and the signing of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) – which, remains unratified – bilateral trade improved reaching a volume of one billion USD in 2019. Yet, the balance of trade is unfavorable for Lebanon, as the value of Lebanon's imports from Turkey (940 million USD in 2019) is largely superior to the value of its exports to Turkey (61 million USD).<sup>18</sup> Lebanon mainly imports foodstuff, clothing, and construction material from Turkey. The competitiveness of Turkish products in the Lebanese market rests on their cost-effectiveness: they offer good quality at reasonable prices, compared to Western (European, American) products.

In recent years, Turkey has emerged as a major provider of energy resources for Lebanon. In fact, the bulk of Turkish foreign direct investments (FDI) in Lebanon (totaling 500 million USD) go to the energy production sector. Since 2013, following a contract between Turkey's leading energy

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1550806/middle-east>

<sup>18</sup> Data provided by the Turkish embassy in Beirut.

company Karpowership and the Lebanese Electricity Utility (EDL), Turkey deploys on the coasts of Zouk and Jiyeh two powerships, Fatmagül Sultan and Orhan Bey, —with a total capacity of 404 MW. By supplying 25% of Lebanon’s total electricity needs, the powerships have helped Lebanon overcome electricity shortages, thus preventing the country from falling into total darkness. As a result, Turkey appears in the public’s eyes as the power that “keeps the lights on” in Lebanon.

Beyond bilateral trade and investment at the official/state-level, Turkish-Lebanese economic relations have acquired a new depth with increased business-to-business interactions. In fact, Turkey’s good neighborhood diplomacy toward Lebanon went hand-in-hand with active economic diplomacy: on his official trips to Lebanon, Erdoğan was accompanied by Turkish businessmen, who took advantage of the visits as an opportunity to connect and network with Lebanese counterparts. As a result, Turkish and Lebanese businessmen established successful cooperation: several leading Turkish brands in different sectors (furniture, textile, foodstuff, machinery, construction materials, retail, and catering)<sup>19</sup> opened franchises in Lebanon that are led by Lebanese businessmen, most of whom are Shias. For instance, Istiklal, the leading Turkish furniture company, gave franchise rights in Lebanon to the Musawi family. As much as this phenomenon may appear surprising, given Turkish-Iranian rivalry in the region and Turkey’s usual association of Shias with Hezbollah and Iran, it is nevertheless a testament of Turkey’s pragmatism. Ankara has thus far dissociated business from politics when conducting its international relations; while Ankara has adopted an adversarial political stance to Tehran (in Syria, for example), it has nevertheless maintained business as usual with Iran, with bilateral trade reaching five billion USD in 2019. Following the same logic, inasmuch as Lebanese Shia entrepreneurs proved to be successful in business, their Turkish counterparts found no issue in cooperating with them.

## EastMed Energy Resources: Lebanon as Experimental Field of Turkey’s “Blue Homeland” Doctrine

In recent years, Lebanon has acquired a new economic significance for Turkey, as an important player in the Eastern Mediterranean equation. In fact, as Turkey’s “strategic depth” doctrine was lately discarded following arising political tensions and crises between Ankara and its neighbors after the Arab revolutions, it was gradually replaced by another doctrine that now shapes Turkey’s foreign policy: the “Blue Homeland” doctrine (Mavi Vatan). Outlined by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz in 2006 and refined recently to the level of state doctrine by Admiral Cihat Yaycı, the doctrine posits that the continental shelf and the water area of Turkey are as important for the state as the land part of it. Or as Admiral Yaycı puts it: “We cannot cede a drop of water of our homeland to others, just as we cannot cede a handful of our land.” In a nutshell, the water part of the homeland is as sacred as the land part, hence Turkey should stand ready to position itself as a strong maritime power and promote and protect its interests both on land and at sea.

In this context, the recently discovered oil and gas resources in the Mediterranean have become a new geopolitical priority for Turkey, especially given that the country is a rising economy that has limited energy resources. Ankara has therefore sought to expand its presence in the Mediterranean and assert its drilling rights, both through diplomatic means and unilateral military moves, such as

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<sup>19</sup> To name a few, in the textile sector: *LCWaikiki* and *Koton*; in the furniture sector: *Istikbal*; in the catering sector: *Mado* and *Simit Sarayi*.

the dispatch of the seismic research vessel *Oruç Reis*, near the shores of Greece and Cyprus, for hydrocarbon resource exploration, in the summer of 2020.

It is in this framework that Lebanon has gained new value in the eyes of Turkey. In early 2019, Israel, Egypt, Greece, Jordan, Italy, and Cyprus formed the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, leaving Turkey and Turkish Cypriots isolated. Since then, Ankara has been seeking new partners to strengthen its position in the EastMed.

In this context, Ankara spent efforts building closer relations and cooperation with Lebanon in the energy field. Ankara's "charm offensive" in the energy sector included a proposal of technical assistance for Lebanon in the delimitation of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). In this endeavor, Ankara seeks to highlight that cooperation with Lebanon in the EastMed could be a win-win game for both parties: while Beirut is provided with technical assistance and know-how in legal matters related to the delimitation of maritime boundaries, Ankara would gain a new partner by its side, in an attempt at counterbalancing the countries who have set up the East Mediterranean Gas Forum.

The EastMed equation also offers a relevant framework to make sense of the recent Turkish-French rivalry over Lebanon. The Turkish leadership was deeply frustrated with the outpouring of support for French President Emmanuel Macron during the latter's visit to Beirut following the explosion that hit the city on August 4, 2020. Ankara was offended by Macron's newfound interest in Lebanon for two main reasons. First, Ankara considers Lebanon as part of its own sphere of influence; in that sense, Macron's visit was interpreted as foreign interventionism and meddling in Turkey's own backyard, prompting Erdoğan to accuse French President Emmanuel Macron of "colonialism". In the words of a Turkish diplomat: "Through the French Initiative for Lebanon, Macron is practicing neo-imperialism in disguise. He wants to go back to the mandate era, and he is undermining Lebanon's sovereignty."<sup>20</sup> Clearly, Ankara views the French initiative as an attempt to place Paris at the heart of the Lebanese political game, thus expanding French influence over Lebanon at the expense of Turkish influence. To undermine and discredit the French role, Ankara presented Macron's visit as a sectarian/communitarian initiative. As the source above puts it: "Mr. Macron only visited Christian neighborhoods in Beirut, which shows that France wants to be the protector of the Lebanese Christians. Our approach is much wider and inclusive, we consider all Lebanese to be our brothers".

Second, Turkey fears that closer relations between Paris and Beirut would pave the way for economic agreements, allowing French firms to exploit Lebanon's potential hydrocarbon resources. This fear was exacerbated by Macron's proposal that the French company Total takes part in Lebanon's exploration activities. In reaction and in the wake of the French President's visit to Beirut, Turkey rushed a high-level official delegation to Lebanon that included Vice-President Fuat Oktay and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. The visit, in which Oktay announced an important humanitarian and medical aid package to the victims of the Beirut blast,<sup>21</sup> also provided an occasion for the Vice-President to suggest that the port of Mersin in Southern Turkey be used as an alternative to the port of Beirut. This proposal could be seen as an attempt by Turkey to consolidate its position on the map of large ports in the Eastern Mediterranean: with the Beirut port being out of service, the Tripoli port having limited capacity to receive large container ships, Syrian ports

<sup>20</sup> Off-the-record conversation with a Turkish diplomat, August 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Namely, four tons of medical equipment, as requested by the Lebanese Ministry of Health.

being under international ban, and Israeli ports being difficult to access, Mersin is a strong candidate to become the major handling port in the Eastern Mediterranean.

## Lebanon: Playground of Turkey's Political Rivalry with other Regional Powers

Turkey's approach to Lebanon is part of Ankara's broader Middle East policy and falls into the dynamics of regional powers' competition. It is commonly believed that Turkish activism in Lebanon is driven by Ankara's willingness to counter Iran. Yet, while it is true that Turkey seeks—by expanding its influence in Lebanon—to roll back Iran's power, Ankara's main priority actually lies elsewhere: Ankara uses Lebanon as a battleground to counterbalance Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the ongoing “Cold War” for the leadership of the Sunni world that opposes the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis to Ankara.

### Bitter Friendship: Turkey's Ambiguous Relation with Iran-Backed Hezbollah

A large majority of Sunni Lebanese—be they intellectuals, politicians, or normal citizens—considers, or at least hopes, that Turkey's growing influence in Lebanon could push back against Iranian influence through Hezbollah. In a context of declining Saudi interest in Lebanon, they long for Turkey to fill the void and empower Sunnis in the face of what is experienced as a Shia takeover of their country. Yet, Iran is not Turkey's top target in Lebanon, and believing that Ankara's Lebanon policy aims to contain Iran is nothing but wishful thinking. In fact, confronting Iran would be against Turkey's foreign policy rationale and interest: Iran is a structurally important partner for Turkey, both at the economic/trade level and political level. Despite their adversarial roles in Syria, Ankara and Tehran have managed to find a *modus vivendi*, and they cooperate on a range of regional issues. In a sense, Turkey and Iran are frenemies: despite their rivalry for regional leadership, their significant bilateral trade and shared regional concerns<sup>22</sup> bring them together in a sort of “marriage of convenience”. In this regional equation, Lebanon does not weigh in enormously; Lebanon is too small for Ankara to jeopardize its relations with Tehran for the sake of containing Hezbollah and pleasing the Sunnis.

In this context, Turkish-Iranian interaction in Lebanon follows the same pragmatism that characterizes their relations at the regional level. At the official level, the Turks and Iran-backed Hezbollah outwardly maintain good relations. According to various sources, Hezbollah officials have spent efforts building positive relations with Turkey. This can be attributed to Hezbollah's pragmatism: The party attempts to coopt regional powers and reach a partial consensus with them that allows him [Hezbollah] to have a free hand over Lebanon and control the country. In turn, Turkey uses its good relations with Hezbollah to expand its business in Lebanon, as most Turkish firms

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<sup>22</sup> Tehran and Ankara are both parties to the Astana Peace Process in Syria. They are both critical of the recent peace agreements between Arab countries and Israel. They both seek to contain the Kurds in Syria as a way to counter their own Kurdish minority's struggle for political autonomy. Iran supported the Turkish-backed Libyan Government of National Accord. And Turkey opposed the U.S. sanctions on Iran.

were able to open franchises in the Lebanese market through Shia businessmen. The good relations between Hezbollah and Ankara materialized during the Aazaz hostage crisis of May 2012: nine Lebanese Shia pilgrims, who were on a visit to Iran, were kidnapped on their way back home by insurgents in Aazaz, Syria, who were hoping to use them for a prisoner swap. Then-Interior Minister Marwan Charbel and General Security Chief Major General Abbas Ibrahim asked for Turkey's mediation to free the Shia hostages. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Turkish Intelligence Chief Hakan Fidan got personally involved in the matter, and a year later the pilgrims were freed, thanks to Ankara's mediation efforts, winning Turkey large popularity among the Shia community. This episode clearly showed that when Hezbollah goes through a crisis, it has no issue resorting to Turkey; this testifies to the positive relations the party maintains with Ankara.

Yet, behind-the-scenes and "under cover", the Turks and Hezbollah are engaged in a subtle confrontation. For Turkey, countering Hezbollah passes by building influence in northern Lebanon. In fact, Turkish influence in the North has become so large and entrenched that it has already undermined Hezbollah's unchecked power. For Hezbollah, who is wary of Turkey's growing role and influence in the North, the game of counterbalancing Turkey plays out at the level of the state's intelligence and security apparatus. A case in point is the Lebanese intelligence and security force's reports of Turkey's alleged efforts in the militarization of Islamist groups in the North. The story merits close examination.

In July 2020, Lebanese Interior Minister Mohammad Fahmi announced that two Syrians and two Turks were arrested as they attempted to smuggle four million USD into Lebanon on an in-bound flight from Turkey. He claimed that the money was meant to finance "violent street movements" in the context of anti-governments protests in the country, and that "instructions" had been sent from Turkey to activists through the mobile application WhatsApp.<sup>23</sup> In the same vein, ASAS Media, a website affiliated with the former Interior Minister Nuhad al-Mashnouq, claimed that Turkey was planning "to occupy Tripoli" through funding and weapons shipments of pro-Turkish nongovernmental organizations and groups.<sup>24</sup>

These claims are difficult to substantiate, for however important Turkish influence in Lebanon is, there is no evidence of Turkey's capacity or willingness to arm groups on the ground. First, Ankara has no interest in empowering the "thawra" (October 17 Revolution): the success of the anti-government protests would jeopardize Turkish interests in Lebanon, as it could topple parties and politicians with whom Ankara has nurtured excellent relations (i.e. Al Mustaqbal and PM Saad Hariri). In that sense, Turkey is a pro status quo power in Lebanon, and it is against its foreign policy rationale and interest to fund anti-government activists. In fact, evidence points to the total absence of Ankara from the "thawra": for instance, during anti-government protests in Tripoli, Sunni activists close to Turkey decried the Turkish embassy's lack of involvement and support. As one activist puts it: "We turned to Turkey in search of support. But Turkey was nowhere to be found."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, while Turkey has built strong ties with Sunni pro-Turkish groups and NGOs in the North, there is no tangible evidence to suggest that it has funded or armed Islamist jihadist groups with the view of undermining Lebanon's political unity and territorial integrity.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4o66S-LghM>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.asasmedia.com/news/386462>

<sup>25</sup> Interview, Tripoli, January 2021.

The flood of security reports raising fears over Turkey's alleged weapons shipments and military role in northern Lebanon may be part of a wider anti-Turkish propaganda orchestrated by Hezbollah. According to a diplomat: "The root cause of allegations against Turkey is to be found in Hezbollah's unease with Ankara's growing influence in Lebanon, and its prestige among the Sunni community, who looks at Turkey as a new regional patron. Therefore, Hezbollah is using its power within the security and intelligence apparatus to deal a blow to Turkey's image. Through drafting and leaking reports that raise fears and security concerns about our role, Hezbollah seeks to ignite anti-Turkish sentiment among public opinion, the ultimate objective being to roll back Ankara's influence in Lebanon."<sup>26</sup> Though there is no proof to substantiate such claims, this narrative does not seem to be far-fetched given Hezbollah's all-powerfulness within state institutions.

## Lebanon: Playing Field of the Turkish-Saudi Cold War

Far from countering Iran, Turkey's geostrategic priority in Lebanon lies in balancing Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In recent years, the rivalry between Riyadh and Ankara for the leadership of the Sunni world has intensified, taking the form of a "Cold War". The growing hostility between the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis on the one hand, and the Ankara-Doha axis on the other, has materialized into proxy wars on different fronts, from Syria to Egypt and Libya.

In this context, Lebanon gradually emerges as a new theater of the "soft" confrontation between Ankara and its Sunni regional rivals. The UAE and Saudi Arabia played a part in advancing the Macron initiative in Lebanon, to Turkey's discontent. As to Ankara, it has attempted to roll back Riyadh/Abu Dhabi's influence in Lebanon by undermining the position of Lebanese politicians close to the Saudi-Emirati axis. A close examination of Turkey's positioning in Lebanon shows that Ankara is in a situation of divorce with Lebanese Sunni politicians who are perceived to be aligned with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. In such a context, it has become increasingly difficult for certain politicians, PM Saad Hariri among them, to maintain good relations with both Ankara and Riyadh. In fact, according to various sources, PM Saad Hariri's visit to Abu Dhabi's crown prince in February 2021 was negatively perceived in Ankara. In a way, Lebanese Sunni politicians are pushed to "choose their camp" if they want to have good relations with Turkey.

## A Critical Assessment of Turkey's Real Power Capacities in Lebanon: Limits of an Emergent Regional Power in a Fragmented State

While Turkey is cast in the public debate as an all-powerful player and is presented as a shaper and mover of dynamics in Lebanon, a critical assessment of Turkey's influence reveals that Ankara is less of an achiever than what its image projects. There is a gap between Turkey's ambitions in Lebanon and its real resources and capacities. In clear terms, while Ankara has been stepping up initiatives in Lebanon, it has not yet succeeded in taking up a leading role.

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<sup>26</sup> Interview under condition of anonymity, February 2021.

## Turkey Entrapped in Lebanon's Communitarian Fault Lines

While Turkey has managed to expand influence at the grassroots level, it has failed to appeal to the elites. Not only have Lebanese elites remained immune to Turkey's "charm offensive", but they also look with suspicion at Ankara's assertiveness in their country. Many have warned of Turkey's "expansionist ambitions" (*tumuhat tawassu'iyya*), denouncing a "neo-ottoman agenda" in Lebanon and the region (*al uthmaniyya al jadida*).

Moreover, Turkey's soft power initiatives were ineffective in overturning the weight of history. Christians and Armenians in Lebanon continue to have strong reservations about Ankara's growing role, as they remain locked in historical prejudices against Turkey. In fact, the Christian community has not overcome the memory of Ottoman occupation and continues to look back at Ottoman rule as an era of repression. Such reading of history was reflected in President Aoun's speech during the celebration of the centennial of Greater Lebanon, where he denounced "state terror" practiced by the Ottomans against the Lebanese as they fought for their emancipation from the control of the Sublime Porte. Similarly, the Armenian community has not overcome the historical weight of the Armenian genocide. Prominent Lebanese figures of Armenian origin have, on several occasions, engaged in Turkey-bashing, expressing their distrust and even hatred of the Turks. A recent case in point, in June 2020, Lebanese TV host Neshan Der Haroutiounian attacked the Turkish president on his live TV show, calling him a "malignant Ottoman", sparking outrage among Turkey's supporters and prompting a response from Turkish authorities (The 961, 2020). Beyond its anecdotal aspect, this episode proves that history is not past and that Turkey's "charm offensive" in Lebanon does not overturn deeply entrenched historical prejudices.

Ankara's popularity in Lebanon is therefore limited to the Sunni community, who sees in Turkey a potent Sunni power able to stand up against Iran and counter Shia dominance over their country. A large majority of Lebanese Sunnis admires the figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whom they view as a powerful and charismatic leader, who takes up the cause of the oppressed and disinherited and stands against Western imperialism and Iranian expansionism. Many call him a "rayyes" (president) or "za'eem" (leader). Yet, there is a difference between appreciating Turkey and being loyal to it. While Lebanon's Sunnis, particularly in the North, sympathize with Turkey, this does not necessarily translate into political allegiance for Ankara, especially that Turkey continues to be perceived as second best to Saudi Arabia.

## Turkey's Limited Influence at Lebanon's State/Institutional Level

Furthermore, Turkish influence at the Sunni grassroots level in Lebanon is not reflected at the institutional level. Ankara's influence over political institutions (Parliament, ministries) and the military and security apparatus remains very limited, especially when compared to other regional powers' ease of access to, and grip on, the same institutions. In various instances, Ankara failed to push forward its initiatives at the state/governmental level, as it has failed to build efficient networks allowing it to navigate easily within Lebanese institutions. In that sense, Turkey's power capacity in Lebanon pales when compared to Iran's capacity to shape dynamics, determine the rules of the game, and influence decision-making processes.

More generally, and as surprising as it may be, Turkey has thus far failed to formulate a consistent long-term strategy for Lebanon. In recent years, in particular since the resignation of Ahmet Davutoğlu in 2016 and the fall into disgrace of his “strategic depth” doctrine, Turkey has been on the defensive rather than on the offensive: instead of acting in Lebanon by formulating a clear action plan and shaping dynamics in the country, Ankara seems to be only reacting to evolutions on the ground. The relative “under-prioritization” of its Lebanon policy can be explained by Ankara’s current overstretch on multiple fronts and its focus on bigger regional crises and files (Libya, Syria, Egypt, Gulf).

## Conclusion: Turkey’s Overachievement Problem

Overall, while Turkey has significantly increased its footprint in Lebanon in the past two decades, it seems to suffer from “overachievement”. This international relations concept refers to the trap emergent states fall into when they pursue a policy of self-aggrandizement, believe in their exceptional powers to shape dynamics, and project an all-powerful image that does not correspond to their real influence; they then paradoxically end up being the victim of their own image, which brings them into the spotlight and puts them under criticism that is disproportional to their actual power capacities (Badie, 2011). In the case of Lebanon, Turkey’s assertive emergent power-posturing in the country has raised fears and concerns over Ankara’s intentions and ambitions and reawakened in the collective imaginary the memory of the Ottoman occupation. In that sense, too much power projection killed Turkish power and made it inefficient.

Nevertheless, while Turkey has limited power at Lebanon’s institutional/state level, it has succeeded in deeply entrenching its presence and influence at the people’s/grassroots level. Ankara’s people-to-people diplomacy, which relied on a humanitarian/civil society approach, has not only raised the profile of Turkey in Lebanon, it has also allowed Ankara to establish networks of supporters at the societal level. These include alumni of Turkey (Lebanese students who were granted scholarships to study in Turkey), NGOs and Turkish-Lebanese Friendship Associations, Turkmens who gained a new sense of pride in their ethnic identity, Sunnis in disinherited areas (mainly in the North), as well as youth attracted to the “Turkish model” of a Muslim-majority state, where Islam coexists with modernity, economic prosperity, and globalization.

In the upcoming years, Turkey’s challenge will be two-fold: to overcome domestic problems that “tie the hands” of the government in the realm of foreign policy (economic recession, growing domestic opposition, and the Kurdish issue), and to leverage its existing networks and circles of supporters in Lebanon to gain greater influence over state institutions. Unless Ankara formulates a clear action plan in this sense, Turkey’s influence in Lebanon may be ephemeral. Instead of gaining a “place in the Sun”, Turkey would have only achieved “fifteen minutes of fame” (Ülgen, 2010).

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jana Jabbour is a PhD in Political Science and International Relations, expert in Middle East politics and contemporary Turkey. She has published extensively about the balance of power in the Middle East and the politics of regional powers and has an acclaimed book about Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East under the rule of the Justice and Development party, published in Paris and titled *La Turquie: l'invention d'une diplomatie émergente* [Turkey: The Invention of an Emerging Diplomacy] (CNRS Editions, 2017). Dr. Jabbour teaches political science and international relations at Sciences Po Paris and the University of Saint Joseph in Beirut (USJ). She has been a Visiting Professor at renowned universities, including Sapienza University of Rome, Ca'Foscari University (Venice), the New York University of Abu Dhabi, and the National University of Singapore. She has recently joined the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) as Associate Fellow.

 @jabbour\_jana

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📍 Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs  
at the American University of Beirut (AUB)  
Issam Fares Institute Building (Facing the Green Oval)

✉ PO Box 11-0236, Riad El-Solh, Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon

☎ +961-1-350000 Ext. 4150

@ ifi.comms@aub.edu.lb

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