BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF STUDY SERIES

Lebanon is in the unique position to have significant strategic relations with Iran and the United States; Saudi Arabia and Syria; Qatar and Egypt; Turkey and France; and numerous others, including the EU and Russia. These extraordinary historic relations require and demand a careful balancing of external interests and relations. The country’s external relations must take into account the strong strategic ties between national political groups (political parties and religious communities) and external actors in order to bolster and support a common Foreign Policy for Lebanon.

This series consists of study papers written by foreign experts to serve as one of many knowledge resources on Lebanon’s external challenges. The intention is to look at Lebanon through the lenses of its neighbors and international partners.

THIS STUDY: TURKEY-LEBANON

The findings in this study are the results of research by Turkish expert analyst Dr. Ömer Taşpınar in an attempt to reflect the Turkish perspective on Lebanon. The study is NOT a Lebanese analysis or assessment of the Lebanon’s policy towards Turkey. The study and its findings do not reflect the opinion of the Common Space Initiative, but will serve as one of the knowledge resources in debates on External Challenges and Perspectives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Ömer Taşpınar is an expert on Turkey, the European Union, Muslims in Europe, political Islam, the Middle East and Kurdish nationalism. He is currently an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies and co-director of the U.S.-Turkey Project at The Brookings Institute. From 1996 to 1997 he worked as consultant at the Strategic Planning Unit of TOFAS-FIAT, Istanbul, and prior to joining Brookings, Taşpınar worked as an Assistant Professor at SAIS in Bologna, Italy. Following his initial studies in Political Science at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, he completed his doctorate studies on Political Islam and Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey at SAIS in 2001. He is the author of several books and publications: Winning Turkey: How America, Europe, and Turkey Can Revive a Fading Partnership (with Philip Gordon, 2008); “The Old Turks Revolt: When Radical Secularism Endangers Democracy” (Foreign Affairs, 2007); “Turkey’s Fading Dream of Europe” (Current History, 2007); “Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded?” (Survival, 2006); Political Islam and Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey: Kemalist Identity in Transition (2005); “New Parameters in U.S.-German-Turkish Relations” (AICGS, 2005); “The Anatomy of Anti-Americanism in Turkey” (Insight Turkey, 2005); “Turkey’s European Quest” (Brookings Analysis Paper, 2004); and he is a columnist for the Turkish Daily ‘Radikal’ and the ‘Pakistan Daily Times’.

ACTIVE NEUTRALITY

Turkey’s Evolving Role in the Middle East

Relations between Turkey and Lebanon gained significant momentum between 2000 and 2010. There are a number of contextual and structural factors that hampered rapprochement between the two countries before the last decade. The most important impediment to improved Turkish-Lebanese relations was Turkey’s problematic relations with Syria and the main cause of Turkey-Syria tension was Syria’s support to the PKK, a Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey. Abdullah Ocalan had a safe haven in Damascus and the PKK kept many of its training camps in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon during the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, Lebanon posed an indirect security threat to Turkey. The problems in Syrian-Turkish relations culminated in October 1998 when Turkey threatened Syria by use of force if it did not cut its support to the PKK. The row ended when Syria forced the PKK leader to leave the country and the two countries signed the Adana Accords on October 20th 1998. The improvement of Turkish-Syrian relations after 1999 had a positive spillover effect on Turkish-Lebanese relations. The same period coincided with the beginning of serious changes in Lebanon.

It is also important to note that Lebanon’s domestic dynamics and geostrategic balance were additional obstacles to potential improvements in Turkish-Lebanese relations. The fact that Lebanon remained under the political-military domination of Syria and Israel for most of the last thirty years posed a structural problem. Given the presence of two external direct actors in Lebanon, Turkey had limited room for action in this country even if it wanted to get more involved. Yet, internal and external Lebanese dynamics began to rapidly evolve at the turn of the century. A new era started with the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon in 2000. This was followed with the unexpected Syrian withdrawal in 2005, shortly after the assassination of Former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

In addition to these contextual factors, perhaps the most important dynamic leading to a structural change in Turkey’s approach to Lebanon was the arrival of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power. In fact, under the AKP, not only Turkish-Lebanese relations but Turkey’s relations with the larger Arab world began to significantly improve. It is in this larger context that the improvement in Turkish-Syrian relations has significantly increased Turkey’s leverage over Damascus. This new situation is very significant for Turkey’s influence in Lebanon for a simple reason:

(continues on page 2)
Active Neutrality

(from page 1)

despite its military withdrawal from Lebanon, Syria remains the most important outside actor in Lebanon. Political groups in Lebanon hold Turkey in high regard, in large part because they believe Ankara has considerable political, economic and diplomatic influence over Syria. In short, they want Turkey to use its leverage on Syria about issues regarding Lebanon.

The Sunni-Shi’a regional polarization in the Middle East after the Iraq war has naturally exacerbated already tense domestic dynamics within Lebanon. In this domestic context of Lebanon, a crucial part of Turkey’s growing “soft power” in Lebanon is related to its efforts to stay above sectarian divides in the country. In other words, Turkey tries hard to be consistent in its policy of not taking sides in the Sunni-Shi’a divide. On the other hand, Ankara wants to be actively involved in facilitating talks and mediating between rival factions. In practice, this means that Ankara’s Lebanon policy has shifted from pacifism to what can be best described as “active neutrality” in order to soften the sectarian fault lines in Lebanon’s politics. For instance, Turkey’s political support and economic aid during the July 2006 war and its aftermath are considered important in Lebanon. Turkey contributed with ground and naval forces to the reinforced UN peacekeeping force UNIFIL. Turkey also initiated many school and hospital projects in Lebanon. These supports are given regardless of sectarian differences. Besides Sunni cities like Tripoli and Saida, Turkey has realized many projects in Sour, which is a region of a Shiite majority, through Turkish Military force under the umbrella of United Nations. Turkey also played an important role in securing the Doha Agreement whereby Lebanon’s government and presidential crisis was temporarily resolved in 2008. More recently, however, an important blow to Turkey’s ability to positively influence the dynamics on the Syrian and Israeli front came with the significant deterioration in relations between Tel Aviv and Ankara. Although this setback in Turkey-Israel relations has improved Turkey’s image in the eyes of Shi’a and Sunni groups in Lebanon, Turkey’s ability to mediate between Syrian and Israel has come to an halt. Finally it is also important to note that Turkey is a relevant economic actor in Lebanon. Over the last five years high level diplomatic and presidential visits have intensified between Ankara and Beirut. Several memorandums of understanding have been signed over issues such as health, agriculture, military cooperation, transport and education. The trade volume between the two countries recently reached $ 1 billion. A free trade agreement was signed in 2010 and visa requirements are now abolished.

The most important dimension of Turkey’s new foreign policy has been the effort to improve relations with its direct Middle Eastern neighbors, namely Iran, Syria and Iraq. Turkey has invested a great deal of diplomatic capital in increasing its profile in multilateral institutions and platforms active in the Middle East. It has become an observer at the Arab League and has hosted foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council states in Istanbul. A Turk won the first democratically contested election to lead the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference. In addition to providing civilian and military assistance to NATO’s missions in the Balkans and Afghanistan, Turkey has contributed ships and 1,000 military personnel and engineers to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. In 2009 Turkey obtained one of the rotating seats on the UN Security Council, a position it had not held since the early 1960s.

A major part of this new Turkish foreign policy is about conflict resolution and the attempt to play a mediating role between rival parties in the Middle East. In that sense Turkey’s new role is relevant for Lebanon. In practice, this means that Ankara’s Lebanon policy has shifted from pacifism to what can be best described as “active neutrality” in order to soften the sectarian fault lines in Lebanese politics. Turkey played an important role in securing the Doha Agreement whereby Lebanon’s government and presidential crisis was resolved in 2008. Similarly, Ankara played a very constructive role in 2007 and 2008 as a mediator between Damascus and Tel Aviv. It has been widely reported that these Israeli-Syrian talks were very close to producing a major breakthrough days before the 2008 December Gaza operation of Israel.

The Gaza operation, followed by the public spat between Israeli President Shimon Peres and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan at Davos in 2009, and more recently the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident poisoned Turkish-Israeli relations. Turkey’s ability to positively influence the dynamics on the Syrian and Israeli levels has therefore come to an end. Although this setback in Turkey-Israel relations has improved Turkey’s image in the eyes of Shi’a and Sunni groups in Lebanon, Turkey is currently no longer in a position to mediate between Syria and Israel. Ultimately, the effectiveness of Turkey as a mediator will depend on its ability to be an honest broker. This will require reconciliation with Israel.

Beyond Israel, Turkey’s relevance for Lebanon will be determined by Ankara’s ability to influence Syria and Iran. Turkey’s vision of growing economic interdependence leading to mutual security arrangements will prove useful in the long-run and only if major conflicts can be avoided in the immediate future.
Turkey's approach to Lebanon is primarily determined by the neo-Ottoman vision that seeks conflict resolution through economic interdependence, regional integration and active media- tion. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu considers the stability of Lebanon as a top priority for Turkish national interests. The Turkish government's logic is simple. In the Middle East, all problems are connected. Lebanon is both a microcosm and mirror of the balance of power in the Middle East. Therefore, Turkey considers the stability of Lebanon as one of the most important and urgent factors assuring regional stability.

The Sunni-Shiite dimension of the precarious Lebanese domes- tic balance is a major source of concern for Turkey. Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are heavily invested in this precarious domestic balance of Lebanon. Turkey is clearly aware that these re- gional players have their own agenda and often more immediate influence and relevance than Turkey. In addition to the already complicated Sunni-Shiite balance, there is also the Israeli-Iranian -Arab aspect of the Lebanese equation. Turkey is deeply con- cerned that Iran may decide to retaliate to Western economic and diplomatic coercion by mobilizing the Hezbollah against Is- rael. The fact that a comradely and alienated Iran would also scale up violence, chaos, and sectarian conflict in Iraq is another source of Turkish anxiety.

In the eyes of Ankara, one thing is certain: even a minor conflict on Lebanese territories will spill over to the wider region. A con- flict in Lebanese territories will largely impact Turkey because it will involve Turkey’s three main neighbors: Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Any type of destabilization in Lebanon – and particularly an es- calation of conflict to civil war levels with outside involvement – will also test Turkey’s already strained relations with Iraq. In this sense, it is important to note that Ankara is increasingly con- cerned about the impact the findings of the Haitian Tribunal will have in Lebanon. Ankara is reportedly lobbying in favor of a formu- la that would delay the results of the Tribunal process. All these factors transform Lebanon’s stability into a strategic prior- ity for Ankara.

Given its strategic interest, how can Ankara exert influence in Lebanon? One generic answer is Turkey’s growing “soft power” as a model of Muslim, secular, Western democracy. A recent survey conducted by an Istanbul-based think-thank in 2009 in seven Arab countries including Lebanon confirms that regional public opinion of Turkey is very positive and that Turkey is a le- gitimate and “accepted actor” in the region. 76 percent think that Turkey has a positive impact on peace in the Arab world. This percentage goes up to 86 percent in Palestinian territories. 61 percent of respondents were in favor of Turkey being a “model” for Arab states. 71 percent think that Turkey has become a more influential actor in the Arab world and 64% believe that EU ac- cession process had had a positive impact on Turkey’s relation with the Arab world. The survey clearly illustrates Turkey’s rising soft power in the Middle East.

However, it is important to keep in mind that Turkey’s rising popularity in the eyes of Arab public opinion may create con- flicts with other Arab neighbors. For instance, there are signals that Cairo is not pleased by Turkey’s rising visibility in Arab-Islamic affairs. After all, the strategic rent that Egypt is able to en- joy thanks to Western financial and political support greatly de- pends on its regional leadership role. When this regional leader- ship role is challenged by Turkey, Egypt is not likely to act kindly. Similarly, Ankara’s pro-Hamas discourse is often a source of con- cern for Jordan, Egypt and secular Palestinians in the Fatah camp.

Given the influence of outside actors on Lebanese domestic dynamics, there is a need to go beyond Turkey’s soft power in the Arab world in order to assess Turkish influence. Turkey’s relevance and leverage in Lebanon, and to a certain degree An- kara’s own specific Lebanon policy, derives from Turkey’s rela- tions with actors that have a more direct impact on Lebanon. This larger strategic context is therefore very important.

Turkmen Population in Lebanon

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) ranks Turkey as the sixth largest economy in the world and, in the last decade, the growth of Turkey per capita income has been near astounding from just over $2,000 in 1980s to almost $14,000 in 2010. In the last 8 years, the Turkish economy managed to grow by an average of 5.6 percent.

Behind this growth lies a far-reaching social transformation that has reshaped Turkey’s domestic political culture. In large part, Turkish growth springs from industrial concerns in more traditional and conservative Central Anatolian heartland. These are the business concerns that have thrown their considerable weight behind the AK Party, both contributing to its success and shaping its political platform. It is noteworthy that they represent not only the new Turkish bourgeoisie, but also the workers who fill the factories of this new class, many of whom are equally traditional in their outlook. A significant part of these achievements are the result of the success to expand abroad by capitalizing on Turkey’s new geo-economic positioning, which puts them at the center of a regional economic system extending not only across the Middle East, but also into Africa and Central Asia.

As the data in the graphic on this page indicate, trade with the European Union remains the most important, but fewer and fewer of the “new” Turks see the old continent as a major future growth market.

Turkish trade with the Middle East remains the most impressive area of growth in recent years, blossoming from $2.6 billion in 2000 to $17.1 billion in 2009; a six and a half fold increase. Turkish firms are highly active in Iraq, for example, where they provide a variety of goods and services in Kurdish areas in particular, and Turkey is now Iraq’s largest trading partner, with a total trade volume of $5.5 between the two countries. The largest share of Ardan and Gaziante are responsible for a large part of this trade, with Gaziante itself exporting over one billion dollars annually to Iraq.

Similarly, since the opening of the Turkish border with Syria, economic exchange between the two countries has grown enormously. Turkish exports to Syria doubled between 2006-8 to reach $1.4 billion. A free trade zone on the border opened in January 2007 and should further accelerate this trend.

Turkish trade with Iraq is the largest of the three. It reached $10 billion in 2009, with Turkey seeking to increase it threefold over the next 3-5 years. In March, Turkey concluded another trade and industry deal to this end, establishing a joint free-industrial zone along the Turkish-Iranian border. Turkey is also investing heavily in the development of Iran’s energy sector. Turkey, which has no energy resources of its own, desperately needs natural gas to fuel its booming economy, and Iran is second only to Russia as a supplier.

Over the last five years as a result of several high level diplomatic and presidential visits, Ankara and Beirut reached several memorandums of understanding over issues such as health, agriculture, military cooperation, transportation and education. The trade volume between Lebanon and Turkey recently reached $1 billion. A free trade agreement was signed in 2010 and visa requirements are now abolished.

When Turkey’s leaders talk of regional integration, they appear to have significantly more in mind than economic inter-penetration. Turkey appears to be looking forward to regional economic integration that will tie the fates of the regional economies more closely together, a development that could foster a more stable regional political system.

As a result of growing economic interdependence formal coordination between Ankara and Middle Eastern governments is increasing. In 2009, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria formalized gatherings of senior cabinet ministers into “high-level strategic cooperation councils.” In June, these countries also agreed to start transforming their bilateral free-trade areas into a jointly managed free-trade zone, a significant move toward EU-style multilateral mechanisms.

Turkey’s Lebanon Policy

The Sunni-Shiite dimension of the precarious Lebanese domestic balance is a major source of concern for Turkey. Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are heavily invested in this precarious domestic balance of Lebanon. Turkey is clearly aware that these regional players have their own agenda and often more immediate influence and relevance than Turkey. In addition to this already complicated Sunni-Shiite balance, there is also the Israeli-Iranian -Arab aspect of the Lebanese equation. Turkey is deeply concerned that Iran may decide to retaliate to Western economic and diplomatic coercion by mobilizing the Hezbollah against Is- rael. The fact that a comradely and alienated Iran would also scale up violence, chaos, and sectarian conflict in Iraq is another source of Turkish anxiety.

In the eyes of Ankara one thing is certain: even a minor conflict on Lebanese territories will spill over to the wider region. A con- flict in Lebanese territories will largely impact Turkey because it will involve Turkey’s three main neighbors: Iran, Syria and Iraq. Any type of destabilization in Lebanon – and particularly an es- calation of conflict to civil war levels with outside involvement – will also test Turkey’s already strained relations with Iraq. In this sense, it is important to note that Ankara is increasingly con- cerned about the impact the findings of the Haitian Tribunal will have in Lebanon. Ankara is reportedly lobbying in favor of a formu- la that would delay the results of the Tribunal process. All these factors transform Lebanon’s stability into a strategic prior- ity for Ankara.

Given its strategic interest, how can Ankara exert influence in Lebanon? One generic answer is Turkey’s growing “soft power” as a model of Muslim, secular, Western democracy. A recent survey conducted by an Istanbul-based think-thank in 2009 in seven Arab countries including Lebanon confirms that regional public opinion of Turkey is very positive and that Turkey is a le- gitimate and “accepted actor” in the region. 76 percent think that Turkey has a positive impact on peace in the Arab world. This percentage goes up to 86 percent in Palestinian territories. 61 percent of respondents were in favor of Turkey being a “model” for Arab states. 71 percent think that Turkey has become a more influential actor in the Arab world and 64% believe that EU ac- cession process had had a positive impact on Turkey’s relation with the Arab world. The survey clearly illustrates Turkey’s rising soft power in the Middle East.

However, it is important to keep in mind that Turkey’s rising popularity in the eyes of Arab public opinion may create con- flicts with other Arab neighbors. For instance, there are signals that Cairo is not pleased by Turkey’s rising visibility in Arab-Islamic affairs. After all, the strategic rent that Egypt is able to en- joy thanks to Western financial and political support greatly de- pends on its regional leadership role. When this regional leader- ship role is challenged by Turkey, Egypt is not likely to act kindly. Similarly, Ankara’s pro-Hamas discourse is often a source of con- cern for Jordan, Egypt and secular Palestinians in the Fatah camp.

Given the influence of outside actors on Lebanon’s domestic dynamics, there is a need to go beyond Turkey’s soft power in the Arab world in order to assess Turkish influence. Turkey’s relevance and leverage in Lebanon, and to a certain degree Ankara’s own specific Lebanon policy, derives from Turkey’s rela- tions with actors that have a more direct impact on Lebanon. This larger strategic context is therefore very important.
One needs to analyze Turkey’s relations with Lebanon in the larger context of the Middle East and the changing perception of Turkey in the region. For most of its republic history Ankara did not consider the Middle East a foreign policy priority. Today, however, after many decades of passivity and neglect Turkey has once again become an active player in the Middle East. The Turkish Republic’s one-sided and exclusively pro-Western orientation began to change with the end of the Cold War, parallel to the emergence of new geopolitical realities in regions surrounding Turkey. A major mistake in analyzing Turkish foreign policy is done when analysts speak of a “pro-Western” versus “Islamic” divide in Ankara’s strategic choices. This is an understandable fallacy. After all, Turkey’s population is almost fully Muslim and a political party with Islamic roots has won consecutive election victories. While the growing importance of religion in Turkey should not be dismissed, a more nuanced debate on Turkey’s strategic vision should take into consideration the different visions of Turkey’s place in the international order.

The neo-Ottoman vision is one in which Turkey rediscovers its Islamic roots as a pivotal state, should thus play a very active diplomatic, political, and particularly with the Turkish military. The way Ankara looks at Iran is through the prism of Iran’s strategic role in terms of building a sense of shared identity. The second characteristic of neo-Ottoman vision is that its goal is to embrace the West as much as the Islamic world.

Turkey’s relations with Israel have always been ambivalent, and the Turkish-Israeli “strategic relationship” was a product of special conditions prevailing in the late 1990s. Turkey at the time was fighting a counterinsurgency and counterterrorism war against the PKK without getting much support from its allies. Ankara also was struggling to counter anti-Turkish and Islamic forces in the region. Neo-Ottomanism is an attempt to balance and broaden the geostrategic horizons of a country, which in the past has been obsessed with following an exclusively Western trajectory.

Three factors help define the neo-Ottoman tendencies of the AKP: The first is the willfulness to come to terms with Turkey’s Ottoman and Islamic heritage at home and abroad. Neo-Ottomanism does not call for Turkey’s integration in the Middle East and beyond. In this neo-Ottoman, paradigm, Ankara’s interests lie in soft power—political, economic, diplomatic and cultural influence—formerly Ottoman territories as well as in other regions where Turkey has strategic and national interests. In practical terms it means that instead of preventing the PKK, neo-Ottomanism allows it to play a greater role in terms of building a sense of shared identity. The second characteristic of neo-Ottoman vision is that its goal is to embrace the West as much as the Islamic world.

Turkey’s Attempt to Engage, Co-opt & Contain Iran

The preferred Turkey policy in dealing with Tehran is a mix of engagement and containment. Ankara clearly sees military intervention as more detrimental than engagement and that ultimately such an intervention will not stop any nuclear program. Turkey also sees itself more of a facilitator for a solution, rather than a mediator, which carries much more responsibility. As it became abundantly clear in the aftermath of the Tehran agreement brokered by Turkey and Brazil, Ankara wants to keep the diplomatic track open. The way Ankara looks at Iran is through the prism of Iran’s strategic role in the Middle East and that Iran is filling the void by exploiting the Palestinian case. Similar dynamics are at play in Iraq, where Turkey wants to contain Iran’s influence. Similarly, Turkey’s Northeastern Anatolia Project, which consists of a series of dams and other irrigation and infrastructure projects.

The project has the potential to deny Syria badly needed water supplies by limiting the flow of Euphrates and Tigris. Partly in response to Syrian pressure for the PKK, Ankara signed an extensive military and intelligence cooperation agreement with Israel in 1996. After Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad expelled the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1996, relations between Turkey and Syria began to improve. Bilateral trade has increased fivefold between 2002 and 2009. Today, Turkey maintains excellent economic, cultural, and diplomatic relations with Syria. Turkish officials often argue that their Syria policy could change the nature of the alliance between Tehran and Damascus. In answer to whether Ankara has any leverage with Damascus, a senior Turkish official responded that “the most concrete result was the behind the scenes Turkish role in the establishment of the government in Lebanon.” As a sign of Syrian realpolitik, Damascus highly values Turkey’s relations with Israel and is now reluctant to see further deterioration in Ankar-Tal Aviv relations. In that sense, Ankara’s future leverage with Syria partly depends on whether problems on the Turkish-Israeli front can be resolved. The same logic applies to Turkey’s ability to influence Syria on issues related to Lebanon. Turkey’s leverage comes from being able to communicate and mediate with all parties. This is why Turkey needs to be close to the United States and Israel as well as to the Sunnis camps and Iran while simultaneously maintaining its channels of communication with Islamist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah open.

Improved Relations & Leverage with Syria

During the 1980s and 1990s, when Turkey’s war with the PKK was at its peak, Syria provided the PKK a safe haven. The Kurdish card of Damascus was in great part used in retaliation and as leverage over the water dispute involving the Tigris and Euphrates. Syria’s main concern has been to change with the end of the Cold War, parallel to the emergence of new geopolitical realities in regions surrounding Turkey. A major mistake in analyzing Turkish foreign policy is done when analysts speak of a “pro-Western” versus “Islamic” divide in Ankara’s strategic choices.