

Analysis

November 6, 2013

Summary: The long-lasting political polarization in Lebanon has created schisms beyond the political and into the social and the cultural, tainting and reshaping competing national narratives. It is against such a backdrop of imbalance and tension that a role for Turkey would have been of a considerably beneficial character, but Ankara's policy toward Beirut remained hesitant. Ankara, as weary and hesitant as it was prior to the Arab Spring and conflict in Syria, can be expected to avoid the troubled setting of Lebanon for a long time to come.

A Strategic Missed Opportunity: Turkey in Lebanon

by *Hassan Mneimneh*

For more than eight years, the permanently fractured political environment of Lebanon has displayed a steady polarization into two opposing camps — the March 8 and March 11 coalitions, named after the defining 2005 demonstrations that confirmed their political stances. The former, with the Shia Hezbollah as its senior partner, and with the majority Christian political current associated with former Army Commander and Syrian foe-turned-friend Michel Aoun, is aligned with the regional “resistance axis” that unites Tehran and Damascus. The latter, with the Sunni majority Future Movement, the Christian Lebanese Forces, and the Lebanese Phalanges as its main constituents, is vocally opposed to the Syrian and Iranian hegemony over Lebanon, and is increasingly more assertive in its demands for the demilitarization of Hezbollah.

This long-lasting polarization, with no significant realignment to challenge its stability, has fostered a gradual amplification of polemical rhetoric, creating schisms beyond the political and into the social and the cultural, tainting and reshaping competing national narratives. In the discourse of March 8 supporters, the opposing camp is a U.S.

and Israeli proxy aiming to discredit the resistance — that is, as presented, Hezbollah's principled and effective stand against Israeli aggression in Lebanon and occupation of Palestine — even at the cost of unraveling Lebanese inter-community harmony. In fact, variants of this discourse assert that March 11 actions are fundamentally in line with the genocidal intents of al-Qaeda affiliates, with many such affiliates being incubated and fostered by leaders of the March 11 coalition. Arguments from the March 11 camp provide the counter accusation of March 8 being a tool of the Damascus and Tehran regimes.

While polemical excesses often color the March 11 media messaging, no false equivalence can be made about the nature of the claims advanced by the two camps. March 8 is indeed an open ally of Syria and Iran, with Tehran providing material support and often mandatory political “guidance” to Hezbollah, while March 11 has no relations with Israel, and has experienced repeated letdowns in the political support it has expected from the United States. The imbalance in the weight of the mutual accusations is mirrored by the asymmetrical distribution of means of influence on the

G | M | F OFFICES

WASHINGTON, DC • BERLIN • PARIS
BRUSSELS • BELGRADE • ANKARA
BUCHAREST • WARSAW • TUNIS



Analysis

ground. With no organized para-military assets, March 11 is at a severe disadvantage vis-à-vis March 8, which holds the regular army level formation of Hezbollah, in addition to a plethora of militias at different levels of organization. The March 11 reliance on Lebanese state institutions and legal forces to counter the coercive power of Hezbollah and its allies is drastically reduced by the March 8 penetration and control of the Lebanese state.

In fact, minor inconsistencies notwithstanding, the March 8 regional “Resistance Axis” camp has maintained a constant vision and a high level of coherence and coordination, while March 11 has struggled to maintain its internal integrity and to solicit reliable support from regional and international partners.

It is against such a backdrop of imbalance and tension that a role for Turkey would have been of a considerably beneficial character. Turkey, through its objective qualities, would have been capable of correcting some of the imbalance, but also, as a credible interlocutor for both camps in Lebanon, of diffusing the tension that afflicts their interaction. In return, Lebanon would have provided Turkey with a pilot test of the combination of its soft power, strategic vision, and material influence, as a stability and peace broker in a region that lacks both. It would also have helped recalibrate the Turkish approach to the region away from the Muslim Brotherhood-centric approach that limited its reach and outreach.

The no-visa-required policy, among other measures, had reintroduced Turkey to Lebanese (and regional) consciousness as a developed and prosperous locus of inspiration and emulation. In fact, with its respective secular and conservative manifestations, Turkey offers affinities for most of the constituents of the Lebanese spectrum. For many, the Turkish middle class urban and provincial town lifestyle felt firmly in line with their own. Both Sunni and Shia Muslim Lebanese, in particular, saw reflections of their own socio-cultural spectrum in Turkey, with understandings and practice of the faith ranging from the secular to the orthodox — in contrast with the two regional nominal sponsors of the respective Lebanese Sunni and Shia communities, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran, each seeking a normative application of a uniform regimented version of religion. While Armenian Lebanese remained vocal in their animosity toward a

Turkish culture unwilling to acknowledge the almost one century old Armenian genocide, the appreciation of both Turkish achievements and policies cut across communitarian lines. The Turkish stance on Palestine, and its actions and words on the Gaza siege in particular, underscored what seemed to be a clear Turkish moral authority.

While circumstances were thus favorable for a Turkish entry in Lebanon, Ankara’s policy toward Beirut remained hesitant. Turkey seemed inclined to avoid the intricate complexity of the Lebanese political scene, considering that the stage, already encumbered by many regional actors, may not accommodate one more. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s brief visit to Beirut in November 2010 appeared to test the limits of Turkish willingness to allocate diplomatic and other resources in support of a high-maintenance low-return environment. The advent of the Arab Spring shortly after this visit further eclipsed the attraction of Lebanon, with Turkish efforts now dedicated to managing the aftermath of a fast unfolding chain of events, soon to reach the Turkish southern borders.

Turkey seemed inclined to avoid the intricate complexity of the Lebanese political scene.

In fact, the sidelining of Lebanon in Turkish policy did not pre-empt the continuing demand for a Turkish role. However, with the derailment of the Turkish approach to Iraq, and with the support provided by Ankara to the Syrian opposition, Turkey was set to lose the quasi-unanimous approval that it had effectively achieved in Lebanon. A swift U-turn was thus implemented in March 8 media. Turkey and its leadership were transitioned overnight from being hailed as “heroes” of just causes to being portrayed as mere tools of imperialism. The characterization of Turkey as a sectarian (Sunni) actor had however to be cultivated in this media on a long-term basis, against the backdrop of a positive Turkish social image across Lebanese communities. March 8 media has since attempted to revive the now defunct archetype of the Ottoman Turkish oppressor through multi-directional appeals to Sunni-Shia sectarian,



Analysis

Arab (and Armenian) nationalistic, and Christian fear of persecution sentiments.

With the unfolding of the Syrian crisis, the March 8 coalition adopted a hard line approach of anti-Turkish rhetoric, attacking and ridiculing “neo-Ottomanism” and accusing Turkey of fomenting the troubles in Syria. It was thus a natural corollary to accuse Ankara of responsibility for the May 2012 kidnapping of 11 Lebanese Shia pilgrims returning, via Syria, from a visit to the holy shrines in Iraq. The location and the group responsible for the kidnapping were soon identified as a Syrian opposition faction based in the Turkish-Syrian town of A’zaz and loosely connected with the Free Syrian Army. Reports of potential Turkish leverage over this faction were translated in the March 8 media as abject Turkish malicious complicity in the action, and on the ground as repeated motions threatening Turkish interests in Lebanon, and sealing the characterization of Turkey as a sectarian force within the maligned U.S.-Israel-Saudi Arabia-al-Qaeda-March 11 axis. In August 2013, two Turkish pilots were kidnapped, allegedly by family members of the A’zaz hostages seeking their exchange with their relatives. This prompted regional actors, notably Qatar, to seek a resolution of the situation through the allotment of considerable funds. Qatar’s efforts were fruitful, with hostages from both sides freed in October 2013. The happy ending of this human drama came however with claims of solemn confirmation, in the March 8 media, of Turkish involvement and responsibility for the original kidnapping. Turkey, according to this narrative, was coerced and defeated.

There does thus seem to be a total knock out of any putative Turkish role and involvement in Lebanon. Ankara, as weary and hesitant as it was prior to regional transformations and this dramatic turn of events, can be expected to avoid the troubled setting of Lebanon for a long time to come. The March 8 assault on Turkey may even be presented as a justification of the initial Turkish reluctance in approaching Lebanon. There is, however, a circular character to this argument, since it was indeed Turkish disengagement that allowed the anti-Turkish rhetoric to fester. In the process, Turkey has ignored, or even lost, potential partners in Lebanon, and forfeited a major inroad into a regional constituency considerably different from the monochromatic and uneven type of allies it currently cultivates. The

shape of the Middle East could have been considerably different.

It is surely tempting, and arguably justified, for Ankara to maintain a mere remedial-level relationship with Lebanon, at least for the near term. However, an assessment of the missed opportunity of engaging Lebanon in the previous phase — an engagement that could have spared Turkey hardship and embarrassment, and may be even offered it meaningful dividends — remains in order.

About the Author

Hassan Mneimneh is a senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, Warsaw, and Tunis. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

About the On Turkey Series

GMF’s On Turkey is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey’s current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and U.S. writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at www.gmfus.org/turkey or subscribe to our mailing list at <http://database.gmfus.org/reaction>.