



# PERSPECTIVES

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## A New Lebanese Civil War?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Despite their desire to evict sectarianism from their country's corrupt government, Lebanese civilians are likely to see increased tensions across religious lines. Iran will continue to back Hezbollah despite its regional weakening, while Turkey and Qatar will play a bigger counterbalancing role by increasing their influence on the Sunni community.

After the Beirut explosion in the summer of 2020, Lebanon seemed poised for a revolution. The country's economy was already in terrible shape due to massive corruption, the global economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, sanctions on Iran (which controls the ruling Shiite Hezbollah militia), and the recognition of Hezbollah as a terror group by more and more countries (which subjected it, in turn, to increased sanctions).

Widespread protests against the government and sectarianism have intensified since the explosion, including against Hezbollah and Iranian influence in Beirut. The explosion's aftermath, particularly regarding cleanup crews and hospital interactions, will likely increase the spread of the coronavirus on a large scale, further weakening the economy. Such has been the damage to the country's image—international donors are refusing to give aid to Lebanon until it enacts political reforms—that Hezbollah is essentially unable to carry out an attack against Israel anytime soon.

The weakness of Iran and Hezbollah at this particular moment, along with the withdrawal of the Gulf States from Lebanon, presented an opportunity for Turkey to [enter the stage](#). Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies in the Gulf have largely given up trying to influence the Lebanese Sunni community, despite their common position against Hezbollah. Turkey and Qatar stepped up to fill the gap, allegedly providing weapons to Sunni communities in the north as

well as aid following the Beirut explosion. The aid is aimed primarily at Lebanon's small Turkic community.

Pro-Gulf media outlets in the region have expressed alarm at these developments, but so have pro-Iranian and pro-Hezbollah media outlets, including within Lebanon. This is curious, as some analysts believe Iran has united with Qatar and Turkey to oppose the West and its regional allies.

The reality is that Turkey and Qatar are not operating in perfect tandem with Iran, though they do cooperate at times in areas of mutual interest. Turkey is seeking, with Qatari funding, to expand its neo-Ottoman vision for the region based on the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood—a project fundamentally incompatible with Iran's Shiite revolutionary export.

The Ottoman Empire once ruled Gaza, Israel, the West Bank, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. These are considered the “near-abroad” by the Turkish regime. Like Iran, the Turks and the Qataris want the Gulf and Western countries out of these nations. However, the regimes have diametrically opposed goals in the region in general and in these countries in particular.

As Hezbollah and Tehran are being blamed for the Lebanese coronavirus and economic crises as well as the Beirut explosion, this is a golden opportunity for Ankara to challenge and perhaps eliminate them from Lebanon's political scene. While Turkey has also faced economic difficulties (partially due to the pandemic) and Western sanctions in recent years, it remains wealthier and more powerful than Iran, and much of the West still considers Turkey an important ally against Russian and Iranian influence throughout the region. As such, it is better poised to succeed in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria than the Islamic Republic.

In Syria earlier this year, the Turkish military crushed Hezbollah's elite Radwan unit (and other fighters) among other Shiite paramilitaries aligned with the Assad regime in Idlib. A weakened Hezbollah, bogged down by infighting with Sunnis within its domain, will be unable to challenge the Turks and their allies in Syria. The placing of Lebanon within Turkey's sphere of influence would give Ankara greater access to the eastern Mediterranean and its gas resources, a particularly desirable prospect given that Lebanon has gas fields of its own. It would also grant Turkey access to a border with Israel from which it could threaten the Jewish state and “champion the Palestinian cause.”

If Turkey does elect to accelerate its push for influence in Lebanon, the likely result would be a new civil war. An impoverished and sectarian country with

massive illegal weapons caches and multiple foreign powers exerting influence within its borders is an ominous scenario. To counter a Turkish expansionist drive, Iran will probably try to increase its aid to Hezbollah. It will view Turkey's expansion into Lebanon as a step toward Ankara's cementing its presence in neighboring Syria as well.

Turkey could, theoretically, send its Sunni supporters from Lebanon to Idlib to fight Iranian-backed forces on its behalf. Qatar would probably fund such ventures. Turkey could then use Lebanese Sunni proxies in its other campaigns in Libya and against the Armenians (who are located, coincidentally, on Iran's northern border).

Any Turkish-backed Lebanese force would likely come into serious conflict with Christians in the country, given that a large proportion of Lebanese Christians are of Armenian descent. That further ramps up the likelihood of civil conflict. So, too, would the interests of Israel and its Arab partners, who all want to see the demise of Hezbollah and to block Qatar's, Iran's, and Turkey's imperial ambitions in the region. Stable Arab countries and the US would likely provide funding to Christian militias in the country, while Israel would (once again) provide arms and training. Greece, Cyprus, and Armenia might also come to the aid of Lebanese Christians due to their shared interest in bogging down Turkey and their ethno-religious links.

For Israel, a civil war in Lebanon could provide the advantage of an already weakened Hezbollah being mired in local conflict and perhaps even defeated by other enemies, with little to no damage to the Jewish state. At the same time, further instability on another northern border of Israel could lead to a refugee crisis and a revival of the Palestinian issue, given the large proportion of Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon.

Turkish and Qatari proxies on Israel's northern border are also undesirable, especially given their commitment to the Palestinian issue. The unreliability of the American presence in the region, as well as the possibility that wealthy Arab countries might shift sides to support radical Sunnis, is another reason why the Jewish state will not be keen to see a second Lebanese civil war. There is little appetite in Jerusalem for sending troops into Lebanon right now to combat Hezbollah, despite the campaign against it in Syria and the likelihood that the unfinished business of 2006 will eventually resume.

The Israeli military is increasing its arsenal and improving its training to prepare for such a war in the future. Israel is embroiled in an economic crisis due to the pandemic and is having issues with governmental stability. Now is simply not the right time for the IDF to reenter Lebanon.

To prevent a resumption of hostilities, the EU and the US, along with the UN and influential Arab countries, must continue to recognize Hezbollah as a terror group and ban or sanction it. But the ban must include arms shipments to forces other than the military—meaning Turkish-Qatari proxies as well as Hezbollah. Instead of waiting for tragedies to occur in the Middle East and indeed in the world at large, the West and other influential blocs must act to prevent the outbreak of civil wars and sectarian terror before it is too late.

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