



• ANALYSIS

Lebanon in Türkiye's New Levant Strategy: Strategic Importance, Opportunities, and Constraints

Sohaib Jawhar, Muhammed Hüseyin Mercan

LEBANON IN TÜRKİYE'S NEW LEVANT STRATEGY: Strategic Importance, Opportunities, and Constraints

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SETA Yayınları

ISBN: 978-625-5703-84-2

Editorial Team: Ebrar Üzümcü, Sudib Sontoran, Gizem Akbaş
Layout: Said Demirtaş

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This analysis examines why Lebanon has become a strategic actor in Türkiye's new Levant strategy after the fall of the Assad regime and the rise of the Israeli threat, and assesses the opportunities and constraints shaping bilateral relations.

SUMMARY

The transformation of the political order and of the security architecture in the Middle East after October 7, 2023- Operation Al-Aqsa Flood- and the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria on December 8, 2024, reshaped the mutual relations between Türkiye and Lebanon. Due to Tel Aviv's aggressive expansionist strategy in the region, Beirut has become a highly strategic actor for Ankara in its broader regional calculations, and Türkiye has, for the first time, assessed Lebanon's security through the lens of its own national security. In this regard, this paper examines the strategic context of Türkiye's accelerating relations with Lebanon within its new strategy for the Levant region. Building on the argument that the new process in Syria and the growing Israeli threat in the region have made the Türkiye-Lebanon rapprochement a necessity, this study also seeks to project the development and deepening of bilateral relations.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Lebanon has not occupied a central place in Türkiye's regional strategy. Ankara has maintained stable relations with the Lebanese state. It has maintained a visible presence in development, culture, and social affairs—particularly through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA)—while also keeping communication channels open with a wide range of Lebanese political actors.¹ However, this engagement has remained far less significant than Türkiye's interventions in Syria, Iraq, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Consequently, what is changing today is not only the scale of Türkiye's intervention in Lebanon but also Lebanon's strategic value within Türkiye's broader regional calculations.

This shift stems primarily from changes in the geopolitical environment surrounding Lebanon. The severe disruption of the region's political status quo following October 7, 2023, and Tel Aviv's accelerated expansionist strategy have necessitated a new level of relations between Ankara and Beirut. Furthermore, the end of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, and the beginning of a new process in Syria led by Ahmed al-Shara have transformed Lebanon into a highly strategic actor for Türkiye in this context. The fact that the Zionist regime's attacks and occupation efforts have extended beyond the borders of Palestine, the increasing political and social fragility in Lebanon, and the potential

¹ TIKA, 'Lübnan'ın Chouf Bölgesinde TIKA Desteğiyle Sürdürülebilir Gıda Üretimi', *TIKA*, 10 February 2026, <https://tika.gov.tr/lubnanin-chouf-bolgesinde-tika-destegiyle-surdurulebilir-gida-uretimi/>.

for the conflict and instability in that country to directly impact the transition process in Syria have placed Beirut at the intersection of issues increasingly relevant to Türkiye's security and strategic interests.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan explicitly articulated this shift in June 2026², stating that Türkiye's security begins not at its southern border or in Hatay, but in Aleppo, Damascus, and Beirut. He also argued that Israeli military operations in Syria and Lebanon have reached a level that threatens Türkiye. The significance of this statement lies not only in its political rhetoric but also in the inclusion of Lebanon within a broader Turkish understanding of the security sphere in the Levant region surrounding Türkiye. Considering that this marks the first time Türkiye has assessed Lebanon's security through the lens of its own national security, it becomes clear that developments in the region are ushering in a new era and that the entire process is being interpreted through a different paradigm.

Building on the points mentioned above, this analysis examines the strategic context of Türkiye's accelerating relations with Lebanon within its new strategy for the Levant region. From the perspective that the new process in Syria and the growing Israeli threat in the region have made the Türkiye-Lebanon rapprochement a necessity, this study also seeks to project the development and deepening of bilateral relations.

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For the first time,
Türkiye assesses
Lebanon's security
through the lens of its
own national security.

SYRIA HAS CHANGED LEBANON'S STRATEGIC VALUE

The traditional Turkish foreign-policy tendency to develop more limited relations with the non-Western world, combined with Lebanon's status as a weak actor in regional politics and its political fragility, prevented Ankara and Beirut from establishing a structural, deep-rooted relationship. Furthermore, the Syrian regime's view of Lebanon as part of its own political and security sphere also posed an obstacle to Ankara's efforts to establish a sphere of influence in Lebanon.

Within the framework of the new global political approach adopted by Türkiye after the Justice and Development Party came to power in November 2002, the emphasis placed on establishing strong and strategic relations with the Arab world—particularly the Levant—opened the door to significant steps between the two countries; however, this process came to a serious halt as a result of the anti-regime protests that began in Syria in 2011 and escalated into a civil war. Lebanon's inability to adopt an independent stance toward Damascus due to Hezbollah's

² TRT World, "TRT World - Israeli Attacks in Syria and Lebanon Threaten Türkiye, President Erdogan Says", 10 June 2026, <https://www.trtworld.com/article/7d3101df5776>.

dominant position in Lebanese politics, coupled with the Syrian crisis's significant impact on Ankara's agenda, prevented Türkiye-Lebanon relations from progressing beyond diplomatic and limited commercial activities between 2011 and 2024.³

The process that began with Bashar al-Assad's departure from the country and the collapse of the regime completely altered the equation that had negatively affected Türkiye-Lebanon relations. The Damascus administration, under the leadership of Ahmed al-Shara, viewed Türkiye as the most important strategic partner in the state-building process,⁴ and this view did more than transform the context of Damascus-Ankara relations. It also reshaped the character of the strat-

egy toward the Levant. Thus, Syria ceased to be a dividing line between Türkiye and Lebanon and became an actor that brought these two countries even closer together.

This transformation helps explain Ankara's growing interest in Beirut. The consolidation of the new political order in Syria depends not only on internal arrangements but also on Damascus's relations with its immediate neighbors. Lebanon is one of the most complex parts of this neighborhood because of the long shared border, smuggling networks, cross-border mobility, refugees, trade, and accumulated security and judicial cases between the two countries.

Beirut, in turn, needs a stable relationship with Damascus to manage many of these issues. This situation creates an objective space for Türkiye to play a role; its importance lies less in traditional political mediation than in Ankara's ability to reach both capitals and exert influence in the new Syrian environment. Erdoğan's statement during Lebanese President Joseph Aoun's visit—that Türkiye⁵ is prepared to contribute to developing the Lebanon-Syria dialogue—reflects this emerging dimension of Ankara's approach.

The Syrian connection matters beyond politics. Stabilizing land routes through Syria could reopen economic opportunities that effectively vanished during the war. For example, the Port of Tripoli would gain greater strategic value if connections to Homs and Syria's interior were reestablished. Road, rail, and energy networks could similarly reconnect Lebanon to an economic landscape extending northward toward⁶ Türkiye and eastward toward Iraq.



Syria has ceased to be a dividing line between Türkiye and Lebanon and has become an actor bringing the two countries closer.

3 Zafer Parlak, 'Turkey's New Foreign Policy Approach: "'Zero' or 'All' Problems with Neighbors Policy?'"', *Middle East Institute*, 29 February 2012, <https://mei.edu/publication/turkeys-new-foreign-policy-approach-zero-or-all-problems-neighbors-policy/>.

4 Atlantic Council, 'President Ahmed Al-Sharaa on Syria's Future, Reconstruction, and Regional Role', *Atlantic Council*, 22 September 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/president-ahmed-al-sharaa-on-syrias-future-reconstruction-and-regional-role/>.

5 Anadolu Agency, 'Turkish President Welcomes Lebanese Counterpart in Ankara', *Anadolu*, 30 July 2026, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-welcomes-lebanese-counterpart-in-ankara/4014046>.

6 Renad Mansour, 'New Energy and Trade Routes Could Bypass Hormuz and Change the Middle East. But Major Challenges Remain | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank', 17 March 2026, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/09/new-energy-and-trade-routes-could-bypass-hormuz-and-change-middle-east-major-challenges>.

Therefore, Lebanon's economic importance to Türkiye should not be measured solely by the size of the Lebanese market, which remains relatively small. Its true significance lies in the role Lebanon could play in the post-war reconstruction of transportation and trade networks in the Levant region. This presents a fundamentally different proposition from Türkiye's traditional economic relations with Lebanon, which have largely revolved around exports, contracting, and development aid.

DEEPENING TURKISH-ISRAELI RIVALRY AND LEBANON

A second factor enhancing Lebanon's strategic importance is the changing nature of Turkish-Israeli relations. The competition between the two countries is no longer limited to Gaza or bilateral relations. This competition is increasingly linked to the future of Syria and, more broadly, to the limits of Türkiye and Israel's power projection in the Levant region.

Tel Aviv's aggressive expansionist strategy—accelerated by theo-political motives following October 7—no longer poses a threat solely to Palestine. Israel's claims to sovereignty in southern Lebanon, its efforts to expand the territory it occupies in Syria, and its aim to destabilize Damascus represent a serious challenge to Türkiye. In the face of the security threat posed by Israel, adopting a unified stance with a holistic perspective on the Levant region appears to be the only viable course of action.

“Ankara aims to consolidate a unified Syrian state with functioning military and security institutions capable of extending central government authority throughout the country.⁷ Türkiye increasingly views Syria's territorial unity, institutional consolidation, and stability as directly connected to its own national security. Israel, by contrast, has sought to preserve its military freedom of action in Syria and has expressed concern that the emergence of new military capabilities—particularly advanced weapons and air-defense systems associated with an expanded Turkish role—could constrain its operations. Reports of possible Turkish access to Syrian military facilities have consequently become a source of friction. This divergence became particularly visible in August 2026, when Israel struck the Abu al-Duhur airbase in Idlib amid Israeli concerns over a possible⁸ Turkish military presence there. However, both Ankara and Damascus denied plans for a permanent Turkish deployment at the facility.”

7 Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 'National Security Council Statement dated September 30, 2026', 30 September 2026, <http://wt.iletisim.gov.tr/english/Haberler/detay/nsc-convenes-at-the-presidential-complex-30-09-26/>.

8 Barak Ravid, 'Syrian Foreign Minister to Axios: Israeli Bombing of Airbase Was Unjustified', Axios, 19 August 2026, <https://www.axios.com/2026/08/19/syria-foreign-minister-israel-bombing-airbase>.

In this emerging equation, it is hard to separate southern Lebanon from southern Syria. In both regions, Israel's military operations, the future of Israel's military presence, border arrangements, Hezbollah's weapons, and the role of the Lebanese Armed Forces all contribute to shaping the security environment along Syria's western and southwestern borders.

This situation makes UNIFIL's future more important in Türkiye's calculations. In July 2026, Erdoğan announced that, after the current international force withdrew,⁹ Türkiye wanted to participate in such initiatives while continuing to assist the Lebanese Armed Forces in supporting security and protecting Lebanon's sovereignty.

This does not mean that Ankara could deploy troops to southern Lebanon. A Turkish military presence in an area close to Israel's northern border would likely face resistance from Israel, especially given the rivalry that has emerged between the two countries in Syria. Consequently, the more significant aspect of Erdoğan's statement is political: Türkiye is signaling that it views itself not as an outside observer but as a stakeholder in discussions about a security architecture that could replace UNIFIL.

THE REDISTRIBUTION OF REGIONAL INFLUENCE

A third dimension concerns the transformation of Lebanon's regional balance of power following the collapse of the Syrian regime and the weakening of the geographic link that once connected Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria. "Iran's influence in Lebanon was never confined to its bilateral relationship with Hezbollah. Rather, it formed part of a broader political, military, and geographic network—the so-called Axis of Resistance—in which the Assad regime served as a critical state-level link, providing Tehran with strategic depth and facilitating land and air corridors connecting Iran through Iraq and Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon."¹⁰

This does not mean that Türkiye will automatically fill the resulting vacuum. Saudi Arabia has begun to assume a more visible political role in Lebanon; Qatar maintains an active presence; and both the U.S. and France still hold positions of influence. More importantly, Ankara, Riyadh, and Doha are now pursuing a much more coordinated approach to Syria's new political order than in earlier stages of the Syrian conflict.¹¹

9 Anadolu Agency, "Türkiye 'closely' Monitoring Efforts to End Israeli Attacks, Occupation; President Erdogan", Anadolu, 30 July 2026, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/turkiye-closely-monitoring-efforts-to-end-israeli-attacks-occupation-president-erdogan/4014186>.

10 Paul Salem, *The Levantine Opportunity in a Churning Middle East*, (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)), 21 September 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/levantine-opportunity-churning-middle-east>.

11 Jeanine Jalkh, 'As US Influence Grows in Lebanon, What Role Will Saudi Arabia Play?', L'Orient Today, 1 October 2026, <https://today.orientlejour.com/article/1549343/as-us-influence-grows-in-lebanon-what-role-will-saudi-arabia-play.html>.

This situation creates an opportunity for Türkiye to engage differently in Lebanon. Rather than competing with Saudi Arabia for influence in the Sunni political sphere or attempting to take over certain elements of Iran's weakening regional position, Türkiye can operate within a broader framework of consensus focused on strengthening Lebanese state institutions, supporting the armed forces, stabilizing Syria, and preventing another large-scale war with Israel.

Hezbollah's weapons issue presents the clearest test of this emerging framework. The Turkish approach currently under discussion does not appear to support a direct internal conflict with Hezbollah.¹² On the contrary, this approach aims to incorporate the arms issue into a broader process—along with Israel's withdrawal and the de-escalation of tensions—that leads to the reestablishment of the state's monopoly over arms and military decision-making.

In this context, the Lebanese press has highlighted Türkiye's contacts with Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and the Lebanese state; it has been noted that these contacts include discussions regarding arrangements for missile stockpiles in the Bekaa Valley¹³ and the cessation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' military activities in Lebanon. Regardless of the initiative's future, its significance lies in the role Türkiye is trying to play: rather than siding with one of Lebanon's rival political camps, it seeks to leverage the channels it maintains with Damascus, Tehran, and Beirut.

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Türkiye signals that it is not an outside observer but a stakeholder in the security architecture that will replace UNIFIL.

STRATEGIC AREAS OF MUTUAL CONVERGENCE: THE MILITARY, THE ECONOMY, AND THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Beyond these political developments, the Lebanese Armed Forces represent one of the most established areas of bilateral cooperation. “Military relations are based on the 2010 framework agreement and subsequent cooperation in training, grants, and technical assistance.” In May 2026, General Rodolphe Haykal, Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, visited Türkiye and met with the Turkish Minister of National Defense and the Chief of the General Staff.¹⁴ The discussions focused

¹² Lara Münif, ‘الشرع لن يدخل لبنان’, *ASAS Media*, 19 June 2026, <https://asasmedia.com/122881/>.

¹³ 17 المدن. August 2026, <https://www.almodon.com/politics/2026/08/17/تركيا-تبادر-في-لبنان-بعد-سوريا-وزيارة-قريبة-السلاح-والانسحاب>.

¹⁴ Demirören Haber Ajansı, ‘Milli Savunma Bakanı Yaşar Güler, Lübnan Silahlı Kuvvetler Komutanı Korgeneral Haykal ile görüşti’, *DHA* | Demirören Haber Ajansı, 5 May 2026, <file:///politika/milli-savunma-bakani-yasar-guler-lubnan-silahli-kuvvetler-komutani-korgeneral-haykal-ile-gorustu-2867187>.

on strengthening bilateral military cooperation, continuing support for the Lebanese Armed Forces, and expectations regarding the post-UNIFIL period.

As the Lebanese Army's responsibilities evolve, this area's importance is also increasing. If the process of establishing the state's monopoly on weapons progresses, and the army assumes broader responsibilities in southern Lebanon, border regions, and areas previously under Hezbollah's military control, its needs for training, surveillance, communications, mobility, and equipment will increase accordingly.



Rather than siding with one of Lebanon's rival camps, Türkiye seeks to leverage its channels with Damascus, Tehran and Beirut.

Türkiye's capabilities in these areas align with Lebanon's specific institutional needs. Expanding cooperation through the armed forces differs politically from building relationships with local political actors. This places Türkiye's involvement within an intergovernmental framework and reduces the sectarian sensitivities that sometimes shape perceptions of Türkiye's activities in northern Lebanon.

Türkiye already has an economic and social foothold in Lebanon. TIKa projects cover education, health, agriculture, cultural heritage, and vocational training, with a particularly strong presence in Tripoli and northern Lebanon. Commercial and maritime links also connect Turkish ports to Tripoli.

However, the transformation in Syria is altering the nature of economic opportunities. The issue is no longer simply whether Türkiye can increase its exports to Lebanon. More important is the possibility of revitalizing an economic landscape that the Syrian war has effectively fragmented.

Tripoli offers the clearest example. Its port, proximity to the Syrian border, and historical ties to Homs enable the city to play a role in trade and economic activities related to Syria's reconstruction process. If road and rail rehabilitation projects move forward, a broader network could emerge that connects Turkish ports to the Lebanese coast by sea, while linking Tripoli and Homs¹⁵ to the interior regions of Syria and Iraq by land.

In such a scenario, rather than remaining a marginal and relatively isolated market, Northern Lebanon could become part of a broader economic zone stretching from southern Türkiye through Syria to Lebanon.

The growing rapprochement between Türkiye and Lebanon does not eliminate areas where their interests clash. The maritime boundary agreement between Lebanon and Cyprus is a clear example. Although Ankara acknowledged that the area in question does not overlap with Türkiye's continental shelf, it objected to the agreement. This objection stems primarily from its stance on Turkish Cypri-

¹⁵ LBC International, 'Lebanon and Syria Discuss Port and Railway Links to Boost Economic Integration', LBCIV7, 25 August 2026, <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/lebanon-news/954237/lbc-lebanon-articles/en>.

ots' rights to resources on the island and from a broader political dispute over the Eastern Mediterranean.

From Lebanon's perspective, its relations with Cyprus are not directed against Türkiye. These relations are shaped by energy concerns, Lebanon's immediate maritime geography, and its ties to Europe. Consequently, this dispute highlights the limits of Ankara's ability to transform its closer political ties with Beirut into Lebanon's alignment with Turkish positions in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁶

There are also domestic political constraints. Türkiye has a significant historical and social presence in Tripoli and northern Lebanon; however, within Lebanon's political system, it lacks an influence network comparable to what Iran or Saudi Arabia built over decades. Moreover, framing Türkiye's role primarily through its relations with the Sunni community in Lebanon will narrow rather than expand Ankara's room for maneuver. It will also raise sensitivities among both Lebanese and Arabs.

CONCLUSION: KEY OPPORTUNITIES FOR TÜRKİYE IN LEBANON

Based on official contacts between the two countries over the past few months, Ankara and Beirut appear to have reached a consensus on establishing strategic cooperation, and steps are being taken to demonstrate the political will to achieve it. Walid Canbolat's¹⁷ visit to Türkiye, a prominent figure in Lebanese political life, immediately after the revolution in Syria, is a significant development. This visit reflects the Lebanese public's positive view of Ankara, and expectations that Türkiye will make strategic moves toward Lebanon amid increasing regional fragility are likely to strengthen bilateral relations. Similarly, the quick succession of visits by Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam and President Joseph Aoun, as well as the meeting between Erdoğan and Salam in New York during the UN General Assembly session, indicate that robust consultations are underway on issues that will build momentum in the relationship.

Lebanon's importance to Türkiye is clear even without assuming the country has become a new Turkish "sphere of influence." Lebanon's significance stems primarily from its position amid the far-reaching transformations in the Levant following the collapse of the Assad regime. As new dynamics emerge in the region, Türkiye has significant opportunities in Lebanon.

16 Reuters, 'Turkey Says Lebanon-Cyprus Maritime Deal Violates Turkish Cypriots' Rights, Is Unacceptable', Middle East, *Reuters*, 27 November 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-says-lebanon-cyprus-maritime-deal-violates-turkish-cypriots-rights-is-2025-11-27/>.

17 Anadolu Agency, 'Turkish President Erdogan Receives Lebanese Druze Leader', Anadolu, 24 December 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-erdogan-receives-lebanese-druze-leader/3433094>.

The first opportunity relates to Syria. Türkiye's simultaneous relations with both Beirut and Damascus offer Ankara a potential role in restructuring bilateral relations between the two states, particularly regarding borders, transportation, security, and trade.

The second relates to security. The future of southern Lebanon, UNIFIL, and the state's monopoly on arms will shape part of the security environment surrounding Syria and, consequently, indirectly influence Türkiye's calculations regarding Israel and the Eastern Mediterranean.



To gain strategic weight in Lebanon, Türkiye does not need to become the country's dominant external power."

Third, it is institutional. Relations with the Lebanese state and its armed forces offer a pathway to transform Türkiye's engagement in this area from a series of development projects and social ties into a more structured relationship between state institutions.

Fourth, the aspect is economic in nature; however, geography matters more than the Lebanese market itself. Tripoli, Homs, seaports, railways, Syria's reconstruction, and regional transportation and energy networks could give Turkish-Lebanese economic relations a broader regional function.

However, Türkiye's capacity to capitalize on these opportunities faces a clear limitation. Lebanon is not an extension of the Syrian arena, and Ankara cannot replicate the influence model it has developed in Syria here. Given the presence of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United States, France, and Iran—combined with Israel's sensitivity to any Turkish security presence in southern Lebanon—it is unrealistic for Türkiye to establish an exclusive sphere of influence.

However, these constraints also help define the opportunity. To gain strategic importance in Lebanon, Türkiye does not need to become the country's dominant external power. Ankara needs to become a key actor on issues linking Lebanon to regional transformations—relations with Syria, the future of southern Lebanon, the development of the Lebanese Armed Forces, economic corridors, and the emerging architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In this sense, rather than serving as a new arena for Türkiye's regional policy, Lebanon is the Levant's western hub, whose geopolitical structure has fundamentally transformed following the fall of the Assad regime. The more Ankara consolidates its position in Syria, the more developments beyond Syria's western border—from Tripoli and Beirut to southern Lebanon—will align with Türkiye's interests. Beyond traditional bilateral relations, this shifting geopolitical reality explains why Lebanon has begun to occupy a different place in Türkiye's strategic calculations.

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Lebanon in Türkiye's New Levant Strategy: Strategic Importance, Opportunities, and Constraints

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