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Turkey and Hezbollah's Pragmatic Engagement in a Changing Levant

By

Giorgio Cafiero



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For information about Rosa&Roubini Associates, please send an email to info@rosa-roubini-associates.com or call +44 (0)20 7101 0718.

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Giorgio Cafiero

Turkey and Hezbollah's Pragmatic Engagement in a Changing Levant

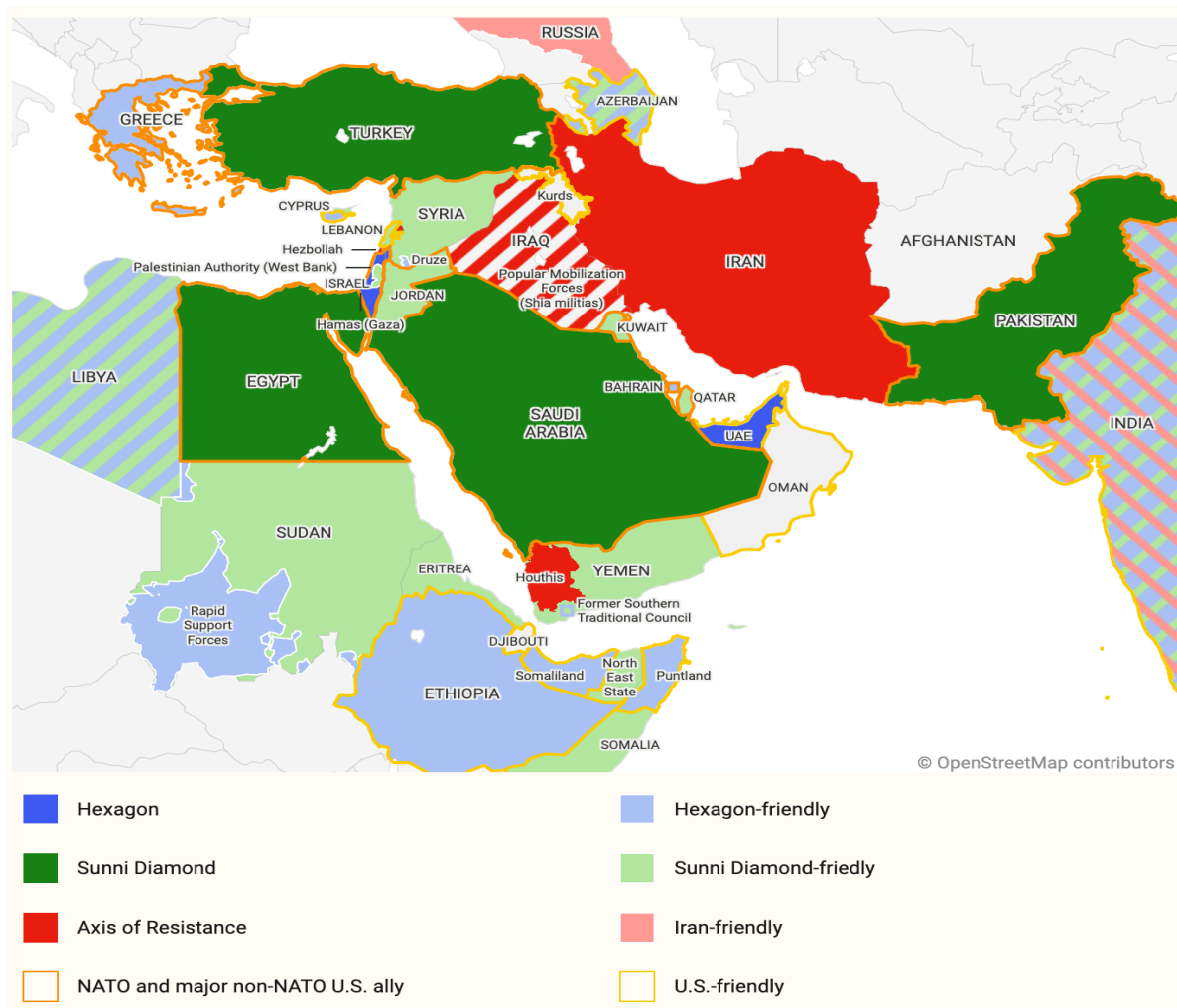
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Executive Summary

- ✦ Turkey has emerged increasingly influential in the Levant following Assad's fall and the sharp reduction of Iranian influence in Syria.
- ✦ Ankara's engagement with Hezbollah is driven primarily by pragmatism and a desire to manage regional instability rather than by ideological or strategic alignment with the group.
- ✦ Turkey has an interest in preventing Hezbollah from becoming a destabilising force in post-Assad Syria because Ankara wants to preserve the pro-Ankara political order in Damascus.
- ✦ Maintaining communication with Hezbollah gives Turkey a channel through which it can convey expectations, establish red lines, and reduce the risk of conflict between Hezbollah and the Syrian government.
- ✦ The collapse of Assad's government and Hezbollah's severe losses during its 2023-24 conflict with Israel have transformed the regional environment and created greater space for Turkey to expand its influence.
- ✦ Turkey is not positioned to replace Iran as Hezbollah's principal sponsor because significant historical, ideological, religious, political, and strategic differences prevent such a realignment.
- ✦ Hezbollah nevertheless has increasing reason to view Turkey as an important regional interlocutor capable of influencing developments in Syria, Lebanon, and the wider Levant.
- ✦ Turkey's increasingly tense rivalry with Israel is an important factor behind Ankara's desire to maintain channels with Hezbollah while simultaneously opposing Hezbollah's military role in post-Assad Syria.
- ✦ Ankara's engagement with Hezbollah carries diplomatic risks because Turkey must balance its regional strategy with relationships with the United States, Gulf Arab governments, and other actors that strongly oppose the Lebanese organisation.
- ✦ Turkey's challenge will be to use engagement with Hezbollah to manage regional tensions without creating the perception that Ankara has formed an alliance with the Iran-aligned group.

Key Picture: A New Regional Order Emerges in the Middle East (Partnerships form on shared strategic goals)



Source: [Martin Plaut](#)

Introduction

The fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government nearly two years ago has had a profound impact on the balance of power in the Levant. With Iranian influence in Syria having sharply decreased and its position in Lebanon under pressure since 2024, Turkey has swiftly emerged as increasingly influential in the Levant.¹ With Ankara playing a critical role in shaping Syria's post-Ba'athist order, Turkey is also confronting a growing rivalry with Israel. Within this wider context, there is growing attention paid to Ankara's cautious engagement with Hezbollah.

Although denied by both Ankara and Damascus, recent reports claimed that Turkey hosted a secret meeting between Hezbollah and the Syrian government led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa in September 2026.² Regardless of what took place (or not), there is a new reality whereby Ankara is increasingly focused on maintaining channels with the Lebanese Shi'a organisation. This is not because Turkey has necessarily ceased to be suspicious of Hezbollah, nor because of a new alliance between Ankara and the Iran-allied group. Instead, the engagement between Turkey and Hezbollah reflects Ankara's pragmatic approach to challenges in Syria, where Ankara wants stability to prevail. Put simply, Turkey is in talks with Hezbollah to contain instability, advance Ankara's interests in Syria and Lebanon, and counter Israel's hegemonic aims in the region.

A major incentive Turkey has for maintaining communication with Hezbollah seems to be Ankara's vested interests in thwarting the organisation from fuelling instability in Syria. The relatively new government in Damascus is pro-Turkey, giving officials in Ankara reasons to protect the current political order from non-state actors that may have reasons to undermine Syria's central authorities. From Turkey's perspective, engagement with Hezbollah provides Ankara with the means to relay its expectations, set red lines, and reduce risks of any armed clash between the Lebanese Shi'a group and Damascus. Reported contacts between Sharaa's government and Hezbollah that Ankara facilitated should be understood within the broader context, even if a particular meeting in Turkey is disputed.

Iran's changing role in the Levant is an important variable in the equation. Ba'athist-ruled Syria long served as a critical link between Iran and Lebanon, permitting the Islamic Republic to preserve military, logistical, and political links to Hezbollah.³ Nonetheless, Assad's ouster in late 2024 fundamentally disrupted that environment at a time in which Hezbollah was being dealt humiliating blows by Israel in the 2023-24 conflict between the two. A consequence of these dramatic developments was an opportunity for Turkey to grow its clout in the Levant, although Turkey replacing Iran as Hezbollah's chief sponsor has not been in the cards for a host of historical, ideological, religious, political, and strategic reasons. Nonetheless, in this new regional environment, Turkey has become more important to Hezbollah as an influential regional interlocutor rather than state patron.

Turkey's Hezbollah Strategy and the Rivalry With Israel

When assessing Ankara's engagement with Hezbollah, the key question is mostly centred on the increasingly tense Turkish-Israeli rivalry. Tel Aviv's aggressive and expansionist foreign policy in Syria and Lebanon deeply unsettles Ankara, which perceives an increasingly grave Israeli threat not only to its immediate Arab neighbours but also Turkey. However, this is not to say that Turkey has any desire for a direct military confrontation with nuclear-armed Israel. Rather, Ankara's preference is to shore up the governments in Damascus and Beirut while addressing conditions that allow external actors to intervene militarily in both Syria and Lebanon. Herein lies Turkey's approach to Hezbollah, which could perhaps be understood by some observers as carrying certain layers of contradiction. While Ankara is against Hezbollah playing a military role in post-Assad Syria, Turkey also recognises that the Iran-allied organisation is an actor in the Levant to contend with, and it is capable of affecting regional countries.

Therefore, Ankara is wise to maintain its channels to Hezbollah as a means of providing Ankara with a mechanism for managing tensions in the region that can spill directly into Turkey if not sufficiently contained. Essentially, Ankara's communications with Hezbollah are not geared toward empowering the group. Instead, such engagement is part of Turkey's quest to stop Hezbollah from taking actions in the region that could undermine Turkey's potential to achieve its goals, which include countering Israel's borderless aggression and Tel Aviv's agendas of trying to fragment Syria and Lebanon.

There are questions to raise about what risks Turkey accepts when it engages Hezbollah, particularly mindful of Ankara's desire to maintain strong relationships with the United States, Gulf Arab governments, and other actors in the Middle East that consider Hezbollah one of Iran's "proxy" groups. How Israel will perceive Turkish engagement with Hezbollah and how such perceptions could inform Tel Aviv's foreign policy toward Ankara raises other questions that Turkish officials must consider.

The Limits and Risks of Ankara's Hezbollah Engagement

Ultimately, it may be difficult for Turkey to engage Hezbollah closely enough to manage the Lebanese group without creating the perception of an Ankara-Hezbollah alliance. Nonetheless, Turkey's leadership appears to view cautious accommodation of Hezbollah as a prudent approach in a Middle East increasingly defined by ongoing conflicts and the fragmentation of the old regional order.

Looking ahead, Turkey will continue seeking to shore up the Syrian state and grow Ankara's influence in the Levant, which will require preventing tensions between actors in Syria and Lebanon from escalating in ways that could serve the interests of Israel and other outside actors. Hezbollah, for its part, has an incentive to continue using communication channels with a major regional state, especially given the serious challenges that the Lebanese group faces in the post-2024 era. The interests of Turkey and Hezbollah can potentially open up space for common understandings that fall short of true alignment. Ankara's engagement with the Iran-allied Lebanese organisation will probably prove consequential in the sense that it will speak to Turkey's increasingly influential role in the Levant's emerging geopolitical order roughly two years after Assad's fall.

NOTES

¹<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/dec/19/balance-of-power-middle-east-turkey-ankara-syria-rebels-iran>

²<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/1/syria-denies-officials-held-secret-talks-with-hezbollah-in-turkiye>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/19/world/middleeast/iran-syria-israel.html>