

Lebanese-Turkish Relations after the 2000s and the Neo-Ottomanist Discourse in Lebanon*

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Abstract

Following its independence and during the post-civil war period, Lebanon had rather inconspicuous relations with Türkiye. Despite the political affinity that arose as a result of Türkiye's interest in Middle East countries including Lebanon in the early 2000s, bilateral relations got out of balance from time to time due to Lebanon's instability, however, were maintained through mutual agreements. After the Lebanon-Israel war in 2006, Türkiye increased its support for Lebanon. Accordingly, the crises that appeared after the Arab Spring in the region led Türkiye to follow a sensitive policy toward the country's sectarian groups. However, some reactions arose in Lebanon's political arena against Türkiye's increasing regional activism bringing several ideological questions about Türkiye's approach toward Lebanon. Regarding the relationship between Türkiye and Lebanon, "Does Türkiye desire to establish a new Ottoman administration in the Middle East?" was one of the questions asked by some groups. Therefore, this study examines whether there are traces of Neo-Ottomanism and sectarianism in the political roadmap followed by the Turkish Government in its Lebanon policy. It discusses the diplomatic response of Türkiye to anti-Ottoman rhetoric in Lebanese politics and its effect on bilateral relations. Accordingly, the study analyzes Türkiye's effort to maintain the balance against sectarian discourse that shapes Lebanon's policy.

Keywords: Türkiye, Lebanon, Politics, Sectarianism, Neo- Ottomanism

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2000’li Yıllar Sonrası Lübnan-Türkiye İlişkileri ve Lübnan’da Neo-Osmanlılık Söylemi*

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Öz

Lübnan, bağımsızlık sonrası modern dönemde ve iç savaş sonrasında Türkiye ile görünür olmayan bir ilişkiye sahip oldu. 2000’li yılların başında Türkiye’nin ilişkilerini geliştirmeye başladığı Ortadoğu ülkelerine Lübnan’ın da katılmasıyla birlikte görünen siyasi yakınlık Lübnan’daki istikrarsızlıklar nedeniyle zaman zaman dengesini kaybetse de ilişkiler karşılıklı müzakereler sayesinde devam etti. 2006 yılında Lübnan-İsrail savaşı sonrasında Türkiye Lübnan’a olan desteğini artırırken, 2011 Arap Baharı sonrasında ortaya çıkan krizler de Türkiye’nin Lübnan’daki dini-mezhepsel gruplarla olan ilişkilerinde daha hassas politikalar izlemesine yol açtı. Türkiye’nin bölgesel aktivizminin artmasına karşı gerek Lübnan iç politikasında gerekse de küresel alanda ortaya çıkan birtakım tepkiler, Türkiye’nin Lübnan’a yaklaşımındaki soruları da beraberinde getirdi. “Türkiye Ortadoğu’da yeni bir Osmanlı yönetimi kurmak istiyor mu?” sorusu ise Türkiye-Lübnan ilişkilerine ilişkin bazı grupların sorduğu sorulardan biriydi. Bu çalışmada Türkiye’nin Lübnan politikasında takip ettiği siyasi yol haritasında Neo-Osmanlılık ve mezhepçi izlerin olup olmadığına değinilecektir. Bu doğrultuda Lübnan siyasetinde zaman zaman ortaya atılan Osmanlı karşıtı söylemlerin diplomatik anlamdaki karşılığı ve ikili ilişkilere etkisi ele alınacak, Lübnan’ın mezhepçi siyasal sistemine göre Sünni blok içerisinde yer alsın da Türkiye’nin Lübnan politikasında mezheplere karşı yürüttüğü denge analiz edilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Lübnan, Siyaset, Mezhepçilik, Neo-Osmanlılık

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1. Introduction

Ottomanism, which arose in response to the rise of nationalism in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century, was a political philosophy centered on the Ottoman Empire's attempt to create a new social model. Following the proclamation of the Tanzimat reforms, the Ottoman authorities adopted the attitude that subject equality, which was regarded as a vital element for the Ottoman Empire's survival, could be realized through the creation of a new Ottoman identity. Neo-Ottomanism, on the other hand, was a notion developed around the end of the 20th century to stress Ottoman identity within the context of the new Türkiye's political and geopolitical connections with its neighbors.

In this context, Neo-Ottomanism, which can be briefly defined as "the reestablishment of the Ottoman order," has frequently been mentioned in studies related to Türkiye's foreign policy. Accordingly, Türkiye's evolving political stance, especially since the 2000s, in regional and global contexts, has sometimes been associated with a specific ideological preference. The concept of "Neo-Ottomanism" has been used to describe this ideology. Opinions put forward regarding this discourse generally align with the roots of the Republic of Türkiye in the Ottoman heritage. For example, Murinson's definition of Neo-Ottomanism as "the soft power of modern Türkiye", emphasizing the Ottoman legacy and Islamic culture, has opened a new perspective on this ideology. According to Murinson, one of the cornerstones of Turkish foreign policy is based on the historical experience of the Ottoman Empire, and Türkiye's policy of balancing among powers is rooted in Ottoman political experience.¹

Even though the Neo-Ottomanism concept is widespread in the Middle East, Greece was the first to introduce it after the 1974 Cyprus peace operation.² It is also possible to trace the emergence of Neo-Ottomanism further back in history. In this point, Cavlan suggests that Cengiz Özakıncı claimed that NATO's task assigned to Türkiye at that time was to re-Ottomanize the Middle East.³ Yet, especially after the Cold War, Neo-Ottomanism further developed and was also embraced by Turgut Özal, the first prime minister after the Cold War.

¹ Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 6 (2006): 80-382

² Gülsen Kaya Osmanbaşıoğlu, "Ortadoğu'da Barışı Tesis Etmede Neo-Osmanlılık Bir Seçenek Olabilir Mi?," *The Academic Elegance* 5, no. 9 (Spring 2018): 3.

³ Turan Cavlan, "Yeni Osmanlılık: Batıdan Kopuş mu?," *NEU Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 2 (2010): 130.

After the 2000s, this notion, which was created to indicate resistance to Türkiye, became commonly used in the Middle East to express broad concern and disapproval. In this regard, Neo-Ottomanism manifested itself in the Middle East as the re-establishment of the Ottoman caliphate, which was bolstered to make different claims from time to time. When new concepts such as “zero problems” and “soft power” emerged in Türkiye’s shifting Middle East strategy after 2002, a counter-argument known as “Neo-Ottomanism” was created in the West and the Middle East. Hence, “Neo-Ottomanism”, like the term “Middle East”, was not a central argument, but had a meaning apart from the realpolitik and geopolitical context.

The equivalent of the Neo-Ottomanism concept in Türkiye-Lebanon relations is based on a different historical background. Moreover, this concept finds its counterpart in the socio-religious and sectarian arena when it comes to Lebanon. To explain this, it is necessary to look at the modern history of both countries. After World War I, when the Turkish Republic was established following the Ottoman Empire’s collapse, Türkiye and Lebanon progressed in different dimensions. Türkiye turned its direction to the West and joined NATO in 1952. Relatively, it applied for membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959 and confirmed its Westward orientation as an associate member of the EEC in 1963. Lebanon, on the other hand, gained its independence from France in 1943, yet it could not have a stable political structure. The civil war in 1958 led Lebanon to become more fragile, and the great conflict between 1975-90 created a chain of political, economic, and religious crises under the country’s sectarian roof.

The fact that the two nations’ different political roadmaps resulted in a cold period in relations between Türkiye and Lebanon, the relations were molded more in the context of regional events. The opening of the Incirlik base in 1951, when the Lebanese civil war started, was the first tension sparked between the two countries. On the other side, Türkiye’s diplomacy with the newly established Israel prompted Lebanon to react to Türkiye’s move in light of its strong links with Greek Cypriots. Finally, the military activities of the Armenian-origin ASALA organization and the PKK terrorist organization in Lebanon played a significant role in upsetting the Turkish-Lebanese balance.⁴

The reactions to the Turkish changing foreign policy towards Lebanon were determined within the framework of the ethnic and religious structure in the

⁴ Zahide Tuba Kor, *Ortadoğu’nun Aynası Lübnan*, (Istanbul: IHH Kitap, 2017), 138-139.

country. In addition to the Sunni and Shiite blocs in Lebanon, sectarian policies of Christian parties, and ethnic componen' responses to Türkiye's Lebanon policy, such as Armenians, contributed to the emergence of the Neo-Ottoman notion in Lebanese political culture. At this point, while Neo-Ottomanism was seen as an Ottoman hegemony by some groups in Lebanon, it was used to express a different attitude toward Türkiye.

The main aim of this study is to explore the Neo-Ottomanism discourse from the perspective of Türkiye-Lebanon relations. In this regard, three topics will be addressed. In the first heading, policies that have brought Türkiye closer to Lebanon politically and commercially will be examined. Accordingly, it will contribute to understanding the reasons why the policies that cause Türkiye's influence to be felt in Lebanon are perceived as Neo-Ottomanism. The second section will focus on Lebanon's perception of Türkiye and the reasons behind the Neo-Ottomanist discourse in various political fronts. In this study, it is claimed that historical background plays as significant a role as current politics behind these discourses. Additionally, it will reveal that the reaction raised by some politicians in Lebanon does not necessarily have a strong influence on the social level and that there is a robust cultural common ground between the two countries. The final section will explain the theoretical basis for Türkiye's activities in Lebanon and provide insight into the political balance in the relations between the two countries.

2. Approaches to Lebanon in Turkish Foreign Policy After 2002

After the newly formed government in 2002, Türkiye adopted a strategic approach to develop bilateral relations with Middle Eastern countries. Accordingly, it has begun to draw a road map for adopting active politics and intervening in cases of political deadlock. Türkiye's goal was to be a guide in the Middle East's stability through political relations based on economy and trust with the countries of the region. Naturally, Lebanon, which is prone to internal conflicts and foreign interventions, was a significant part of this policy. As a result, a sensitive foreign policy strategy for a country like Lebanon that relied on strategically delicate balances had to be devised.

In this context, Lebanese Foreign Minister Jean Obeid's visit to Ankara in 2004 marked the beginning of a new era for both Lebanon and Türkiye, as this was the first visit at the level of foreign ministers since the civil war ended in 1990. The arrival of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in Türkiye in May, had also an echo in the two countries in question and among the

countries in the region.⁵ During the visit, economic ties strengthened through four different protocols signed between Türkiye and Lebanon in the fields of taxation, investment, agriculture, and technology in the first place.⁶ This attempt was crucial for Lebanon, whose economy had collapsed following the civil war, and a positive initiative for expanding Türkiye's export potential, as Türkiye's exports to Lebanon increased by approximately \$100 million over the previous year.⁷

Prior to Rafiq Hariri's visit, Syrian President Bashar Assad visited Türkiye in January and both countries displayed a positive diplomatic picture. However, despite this positive atmosphere, Türkiye declared in March that it supported Lebanon in Syria's troops' withdrawal from Lebanon.⁸ Therefore, Hariri's visit in May was remarkable as it added Türkiye to the international support he needed to pull Syria's political and military authority, which began to dominate Lebanon after the civil war. Two months later, the historic visit of Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul to Beirut revealed Türkiye's sensitivity to Lebanon's sovereign rights.

Türkiye increased its visibility in Lebanon thanks to the mediation efforts and subsequent initiatives in the 2006 Lebanon-Israel war. At this point, it was an important political step for Türkiye that it deployed 1000 soldiers of the Turkish army in Lebanon within the framework of the peace agreement of the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) affiliated with the United Nations. Accordingly, following the war Türkiye provided approximately \$20 million for emergency aid to Lebanon to strengthen social relations. In addition, it undertook the construction of 70 permanent prefabricated schools and two permanent prefabricated health centers in Lebanon within the framework of the commitment made at the Stockholm Conference.⁹ Other prominent support was Türkiye's financial contribution to the UN-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon.¹⁰

⁵Jana Jabbour, *Türkiye: Dıblomasıyya al Quvva al Nahıda*, trans. Jan Jabbour, (Qatar: Arab Center For Research & Policy Studies, 2019), 143.

⁶ Foreign Economic Relations Board, *Lübnan Ülke Raporu Mart 2014*, accessed June 13, 2021, https://www.corlutso.org.tr/uploads/docs/lubnan_ulke_raporu.pdf

⁷ Oğuz Kaymakçı, "Arap Baharı Öncesinde Kalkınma Sürecinde Seçilmiş Ülkeler Bazında Ortadoğu Ekonomileri ve Türkiye ile Ticari İlişkileri -II, *The International Journal of Economic and Social Research*, 8, no.2, (Winter 2012): 228.

⁸ "Cumhurbaşkanı Sezer Suriye'de", *Amerika'nın Sesi*, April 13, 2005, accessed 15 June 2021, <https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/a-17-2005-04-13-voa7-87971207/834556.html>,

⁹ Foreign Economic Relations Board, *Lübnan Ülke Raporu Mart 2014*, accessed June 13, 2021, https://www.corlutso.org.tr/uploads/docs/lubnan_ulke_raporu.pdf

¹⁰ Robert Rabil, "Lebanon-Türkiye Relations: Reclaiming the "Sword" and "Crescent" of Islam", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 15, no.1, (March 2021): 97.

Another significant result of the 2006 war on the Türkiye-Lebanon axis was revealed in the “Meeting of Seven” that held after the war.¹¹ The meeting was held in Islamabad, Pakistan’s capital, in 2007 at the level of foreign ministers from seven countries due to the concerns about Sunni-Shiite polarization regarding Hezbollah’s increasing legitimacy after its victory against Israel in the Lebanon attack, as well as political calculations. Türkiye joined the meeting along with Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Indonesia. However, Türkiye had a purpose beyond being a part of the Sunni bloc in the region. For this reason, it was careful not to cut off contact with Hezbollah and the other Shiite groups in Lebanon.

While Türkiye’s approach to Lebanon intensified between 2003-2010, the visit of the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan revealed the importance of Lebanon, which has been neglected to a certain extent, for Türkiye. Especially the multi-purpose hospital built by Türkiye in Sayda, which can serve 20.000 people annually, has been a remarkable element that shows the changing character of Türkiye in foreign policy and strengthens its presence in Lebanon.

The Arab Spring, which began in 2011, was clearly a major turning point in Türkiye’s relations, which was still developing at the time, with Middle Eastern countries. Given the consequences of the Arab Spring in the countries of the region, Türkiye’s attitude began to change for some countries, where the uprisings turned into civil wars. As a result of this shift in attitude, Türkiye’s bilateral relations with Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries, except with Qatar, became instable. Political and diplomatic tensions were occasionally reflected in Türkiye’s relations with Lebanon, which split into two different political coalitions (8 March-14 March) following Rafiq Hariri’s assassination in 2005. The abduction of two Turkish pilots in Beirut in 2013 for the release of Shiite pilgrims, who were allegedly abducted by the Free Syrian Army, backed by Türkiye against the Assad regime, was important in terms of revealing the sectarian tone in the relations between the two countries.¹²

Even though political tensions between Türkiye and Lebanon have escalated from time to time, it can be said that economic relations have not suffered as much. Türkiye, for example, severed its ties when Syria shot

¹¹ “Pakistan to host meeting of seven islamic nations foreign ministers”, *Kuwait News Agency*, February 24, 2007, accessed 24 June 2021,

<https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?language=en&id=1713559#>,

¹² “İki THY Pilotu Beyrut’ta kaçırıldı”, *BBC*, August 9, 2013, accessed 18 June 2021, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2013/08/130809_thy_kacirma.

down a Turkish jet in Syrian airspace in 2012,¹³ and widespread Syrian support and anti-Türkiye sentiment gradually emerged in Lebanon. Yet, Türkiye made a commercial agreement to supply electricity to Lebanon through a Turkish company called “Karpowership” in order to solve its chronic electricity problem.¹⁴ In other words, Türkiye prevented its presence in Lebanon from being damaged despite the attrition operation launched against it. In addition, Türkiye continued its activities without slowing down through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) Office, opened in Beirut in 2014,¹⁵ and Yunus Emre Institute to prevent political and diplomatic conflicts that began with Lebanon to harm the anti-sectarian cultural ties established with the Lebanese people.

2016 was a year in which significant developments took place in Türkiye’s Lebanon policy. As a result of the crisis between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, the \$3 billion military aid, which Saudi Arabia pledged to give to the Lebanese army, was suspended.¹⁶ Besides, Lebanon was isolated from the Sunni world due to the election of Hezbollah-backed Michel Aoun as the new president the same year. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Türkiye was on good terms with Lebanese politics. During his visit in December, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu expressed his country’s support for the election of the president and the formation of the new government to ensure stability in Lebanon, which was a remarkable step toward breaking this isolation.¹⁷ After this visit, the trade volume between Lebanon and Türkiye increased by 25%, and Türkiye exceeded the export amount in 2012 in 2017.¹⁸

¹³ Ahmet Yavuz Gürler, Serap Yolcu Yavuz. “Suriye Krizine Neorealist Perspektifile Türkiye Cumhuriyeti ve Rusya Federasyonu’nun Yaklaşımı: 1957 & 2011 Krizleri”. *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, no. 2 (January 2023): 229.

¹⁴ Beyrut’un elektriğini Türkiye sağlayacak”, *Haber 7*, February 18, 2013, accessed 28 August 2023, <https://ekonomi.haber7.com/dunya-ekonomisi/haber/991601-beyrutun-elektrigini-turkiye-saglayacak>.

¹⁵ Gökhan Umut, Nurçin Yıldız, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency 2014, accessed 28 August 2023,

<https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/2016/Prestij%20Eserler/Faaliyet%20Raporu%202014.pdf>.

¹⁶ “ Saudi Arabia halts \$3bn package to Lebanese army”, BBC, February 19, 2016, accessed 28 August 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35614917>.

¹⁷ “Press Release Regarding the Formation of New Government in Lebanon,” Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed 17 June, 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-329_-20-december-2016_-press-release-regarding-the-formation-of-new-government-in-lebanon.en.mfa.

¹⁸ Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Trade General Directorate of Foreign Affairs and International Activities “Lübnan Ülke Profili”, accessed 17 June 2021, <https://www.deik.org.tr/uploads/lubnan-ulke-profil-2020.pdf>.

Additionally, after the failed coup attempt in Türkiye on July 15, 2016, Saad Hariri's supported Türkiye with the words "for the victory of the democratic path over the coup" was another crucial factor in the strengthening of relations.¹⁹ Subhi al- Tufayli, former secretary general of Hezbollah at the time, said, "When we first heard the news of the coup attempt, we were deeply worried that the battle was lost. At one point in the night, I had wished I was there [in Türkiye], that I might die defending a just cause," and his message that he stood behind Türkiye appeared to be a result of the sectarian balance in Türkiye's "soft power" policy.²⁰

The recent reaction to Türkiye's sensitive policy towards Lebanon was revealed in the deadly explosion on August 4, 2020. Türkiye was one of the first countries to take action after the Beirut explosion, which killed 200 people and injured more than 5000. The aid sent to Lebanon by various aid organizations, especially TIKA and AFAD, and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's visit to the explosion area drew attention, revealing the sensitivity for Lebanon at a time when attention was directed to Türkiye in the context of Eastern Mediterranean policies.

3. Discourses on Neo-Ottoman Thoughts and a View from Lebanon to Türkiye

The event that highlighted Türkiye's role in the Middle East in the global agenda was undoubtedly Erdoğan's "one-minute" outburst at the Davos Economic Forum in 2009. As a result of this outburst, unexpected reactions emerged against Türkiye's proactive policy in the Middle East. Following Erdoğan's harsh tone toward Israeli President Shimon Perez, articles were published in the global media one after the other, calling Erdoğan "sultan" and claiming that Türkiye has a policy of establishing a new Ottoman caliphate in the Middle East. Although such analyses, which have not been slowing down since 2009, have been revised in light of global and regional developments in western media, the headlines have always been the same. The contents were nearly identical to the orientalist arguments put forward to the sectarian policy of the Ottoman Empire in the Arab regions.²¹ An article titled, for instance, "Erdoğan Is Making the Ottoman Empire Great

¹⁹ Live Updates: Failed Coup in Türkiye, *The Wall Street Journal*, accessed 17 June, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-DISPATCHB-4504>.

²⁰ "West behind failed Türkiye coup bid: Ex-Hezbollah chief", *Anadolu Agency*, accessed 24 July 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/Türkiye/west-behind-failed-Türkiye-coup-bid-ex-hezbollah-chief/613744>.

²¹ Mshari Al-Zaydi, "The Return of the Ottoman Empire", *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 2 May 2009, <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=15618>.

Again,” published in *The Foreign Policy* in 2018, revealed the same concern. Some other analyses offered statements that positioned Türkiye against the Ottomans. In this context, the Washington Institute claimed in 2009 that Türkiye would not become an Ottoman Empire because its relations with Israel were colder than those with other countries:

“Rather than being neo-Ottoman in a “secular” sense, the AKP’s foreign policy is asymmetrically focused on Arab Islamists in particular and the Muslim Middle East more generally. It is pro-Hamas, pro-Syria, pro-Hezbollah, pro-Qatar, pro-Saudi. The AKP views the world as composed of religious blocks, and this disposition colors its views of the Middle East and the world. A Turkish foreign policy rooted in Ottoman grandeur would have required that the AKP to adopt an equidistance toward Jews and Muslims, and toward Israelis and Arabs in the Middle East. This has not been the case.”²²

However, the same author wrote an article ten years later headed “Erdogan’s Empire: Türkiye and the Politics of the Middle East,” which contains the exact opposite statements, sets an example of how the oppositional discourse has changed and transformed due to the changing policies of Türkiye.²³

Ottoman-based discourses about Türkiye’s Middle East strategy appeared in Türkiye’s agenda as well as the world’s agenda. However, Türkiye has a different perspective than the West and the Middle East. When discussing the Ottoman role in Türkiye’s policy in the Middle East, former presidential spokesman İbrahim Kalın emphasized the common heritage such as historical and cultural ties between Türkiye and Arab lands. Whereas Türkiye has created the Middle East strategy based on the concept of ‘strategic depth’:

“Although AKP policy is often seen as being driven by ideological factors, such as Islamism and New Ottomanism, the primary determinants of Turkish foreign policy actually stem from more

²² Soner Cagaptay, *The AKP's Foreign Policy: The Misnomer of "Neo-Ottomanism"*, *Washington Institute*, 24 April 2009, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/akps-foreign-policy-misnomer-Neo-Ottomanism>.

²³ Soner Cagaptay, “Erdogan's Empire: Türkiye and the Politics of the Middle East”, *Washington Institute*, 10 June 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erdogans-empire-Türkiye-and-politics-middle-east>.

practical factors, such as Türkiye's economic demands, its historical ties to its neighbors and its sensitive geopolitical position."²⁴

Lebanon was one of the Middle Eastern countries where Ottoman-centered discourses on Türkiye were expressed more loudly. The increased importance of Lebanon in Turkish foreign policy since 2006 has laid the groundwork not only for positive political and social developments but also for the advancement of Turkish-Lebanese friendship. When Ahmet Davutoğlu, the foreign minister of that time, went to the Kavashra region, where the Turkmen population is concentrated, in 2010, he emphasized the importance of cultural relations, saying that "You are the bridge of friendship between Lebanon and Türkiye. We will always stand by you as we also do for our Palestinian brothers in Gaza. When you are in peace and prosperity, we are also at peace. Your problem is our problem."²⁵

However, some groups in Lebanon had a different perspective on Türkiye's approach, and those involved in the polarizations in Lebanon interpreted Türkiye's policy by using neo-Ottoman discourse. At this stage, sporadic rhetoric based on "Ottomanism" appeared. For instance, the theme of "revival of the empire" was featured in Lebanese news during Erdoğan's visit to Lebanon in 2010. Some sources claim that Erdoğan preferred to use strategic and diplomatic efforts rather than military power in pursuing his imperial ambitions. The same sources claimed that because Erdoğan denied the "Armenian genocide committed by the Ottoman State", Armenians demonstrated against him while he was in their country.²⁶ In this sense, the analysis titled "Erdoğan is not our hero" in *al Akhbar*, had following words:

"It is the second manifestation of the "neo-Ottoman" inauguration of the dream of restoring a "Turanian" hegemony, during which the Arabs underwent 600 years of colonization under the banner of the caliphate within a series of historical conflict/competition between the three "permanent" nationalities in the region, in which the Turks are now progressing."²⁷

²⁴"Turkish Foreign Policy Between Ideology and Realpolitik", *The Middle East Institute*, accessed 20 June, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/resources/transcript/turkish-foreign-policy-between-ideology-and-realpolitik>.

²⁵ Oytun Orhan, "The Forgotten Turks: Turkmens Of Lebanon", *Center For Middle Eastern Strategic Studies*, (February 2010): 42.

²⁶"Erdogan Yakhtatim Ziyaratehu Le Lubnan" *Lebanese Forces*, November 26, 2010, accessed 21 June 2021, <https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2010/11/26/113912>.

²⁷ Muhammad Taima, "Erdogan Laysa Batalna", *Al- Akhbar Newspaper*, November 5, 2011, accessed 21 June 2021, <https://al-akhbar.com/Opinion/97233>.

At this juncture, it is necessary to emphasize the political stance of Lebanon toward Erdogan's Türkiye. Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran made consecutive visits to Lebanon in 2010 in addition to Türkiye. The four countries' plans and the political groups they met were distinct. Therefore, Iran's visit was perceived as Shiite hegemony, Saudi Arabia's visit as Sunni hegemony, and Syria's visit as political hegemony. The only difference was that Türkiye, as a Sunni country, did not engage in such sectarian discourse or action in its foreign policy and remained neutral within the framework of the "win-win" strategy instead. In the same year, Türkiye signed important agreements in trade, tourism, transportation, and energy with Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.²⁸ Türkiye's Lebanon policy at that time did not have an oppressive or accusatory rhetoric. As a result, the discomfort felt over the "Ottoman" identity was constantly emphasized by some exact groups in Lebanon.

The great outburst against a felt Ottoman tendency came from former Lebanese President Michel Aoun in 2019. According to Aoun, the Ottoman State committed "state terrorism" in territories that belong to Lebanon today. He also alleged the oppression that existed in Lebanon during Ottoman rule:

"From 1516 through 1918, four centuries and two years during which Mount Lebanon lived under Ottoman occupation. Despite being distinguished by a kind of autonomy, its people suffered a lot, its political format fluctuated between the Emirate, the Twin Qaymaqam at and the Mutessarifat, and its area and extension changed according to the political circumstances, while the rest of the Lebanese regions remained totally stripped from it, under direct Ottoman rule and divided between the Empire's regions."²⁹

The periods of the Double Qaimqamiate (1845-1860) and the Mutasarrifate (1861-1915) mentioned by President Aoun were two administrative systems formed following the conflict between the Druze and the Maronites. It is also noteworthy to remember the effect of European intervention in Lebanon during the 19th century. Hence, Lebanese lands were divided into sectarian governments for the first time in the history of Lebanon. Aoun's accusation that the Ottomans engaged in "state terrorism", on the other hand, was baseless when viewed in the context of historical data covering a

²⁸ Filiz Cicioğlu, "Lübnan 2010", *Middle East Institute, (ORMER)*, https://ormer.sakarya.edu.tr/uploads/files/04_mey_2010_145.pdf.

²⁹ "President Aoun: "We want the Greater Lebanon", Presidency of the Republic of Lebanon, accessed 24 June, 2021, <https://www.presidency.gov.lb/English/Pages/SpeechesDetails.aspx?nid=25625>.

period from 1516 to the beginning of the 20th century. Since the Emirs who ruled the region was first Druze, then Sunni and Maronites. Also, all sects had independence in their internal affairs. As a matter of fact, the system implemented by the Ottoman state in its lands was unrelated to sectarianism could be seen undoubtedly.

Neo-Ottoman approaches also emerged as a significant factor in intra-sectarian rivalry in Lebanon. The strongest reaction has come in the context of relations between Türkiye and two strong Druze leaders, Walid Jumblatt and Talal Arslan, of Lebanon. Jumblatt and Arslan families have prominent members who served the Ottoman Empire. Ali Jumblatt Beik, who was the Governor of Aleppo in the 17th century, Jumblatt, the son of Kasim Beik, who was educated in the Ottoman palace, and Nesib Beik Jumblatt, the administrator of the Shouf district in the 19th century, were all notable personalities during the Ottoman era. Also in the same period Emir Ahmet Arslan was appointed Mount Lebanon's first Druze district governor. Emir Shakib Arslan, a descendant of the same family, became a prominent statesman in the Ottoman parliament (Meclis-i Mebusan) representing the Druze. Although both families have ties to the Ottoman Empire, their approaches are drastically different. For example, progressive party leader Walid Jumblatt supported Türkiye's regional position when speaking about Palestine at the conference held in Bahrain in 2019:

“Under Sultan Abdul Hamid (II), (Theodor) Herzl asked him to buy Palestine to transport the Jews (there), and the Sultan refused. Today in Bahrain, the grandson of Herzl, Jared Kushner, will ask Arabs to sell Palestine to transport Palestinian families to Jordan to Sinai to Lebanon to Syria to the diaspora.”³⁰

Talal Arslan, another significant Druze leader, holds the opposite position to his ancestor, Shakib Arslan. Unlike Walid Jumblatt he saw Türkiye's political approach, just like Michel Aun, as a continuation of the Ottoman Empire. In this direction, Talal Arslan characterized Türkiye's efforts in Syria as a “continuation of Ottoman ambition” and must end as quickly as possible.³¹

Hezbollah, the most popular Shiite party and military organization in Lebanon, also took a position by using the Neo-Ottoman discourse. One of the intermediary actors in the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah leader Hasan

³⁰ “Lebanese Leader Blasts Arab Leaders, Evokes Ottoman Legacy in Palestine”, *TRT World*, accessed 26 June, 2021. <https://www.trtworld.com/Türkiye/lebanese-leader-blasts-arab-leaders-evokes-ottoman-legacy-in-palestine-27851>.

³¹ “Arslan: Al Udvan al Turki as Safir Ala Turkiya, gad Yadhoul al Mintikha al Fawda”, *Al Nour*, accessed 27 June 2021, <https://124.im/FnwuSJV>.

Nasrallah, had described in 2010 Türkiye's leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the leader of Muslims. However, due to a change in Türkiye's Syria policy in 2016 Nasrallah emphasized the Neo-Ottoman argument and stated that Türkiye's Neo-Ottoman project collapsed.³² In the same year, Subhi Tufeyli, who was Hezbollah's first general secretary but left the party because of his criticisms to the organization's Syria policy, emphasized the Turkish Ottoman roots as follows:

“Türkiye remains in the heart of many Muslims. Despite the passage of 100 years, they still remember that Türkiye was at the center of the Islamic caliphate and the source of the Ottoman Empire.”³³

In 2021, some Lebanese groups stopped calling Erdoğan an “Ottoman representative” but named him a “Sunni guard”. Although Neo-Ottomanism has remained popular, recent political developments have transformed the Ottomanist concept into Sunni patronage. Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries' negative relations, which emerged in 2016, with Lebanon led to this kind of transformation. Accordingly, after the Beirut explosion Turkish government announced that it would grant Turkish citizenship to the Turkmen population in the country. Because of that, some analysts recognized Türkiye as the Sunni protector of Lebanon rather than the successor of the Ottoman Caliphate.³⁴

For such discourses, which have frequently increased in Lebanon, especially since 2019, it is critical to examine Lebanon's sectarian structure and the colonial history inherited from the 19th century. In this regard, the traces of the hegemony France established in Lebanon since the early 19th century still exist. Considering the social memory, it can be seen clearly why some groups in Lebanon today try to portray Türkiye as the protector of Sunnis only. This style, which includes the classical post-colonial understanding, leads to a different description of Türkiye's role.

However, unlike the mainstream media and the political layer, it is critical to consider the social reaction. Support from Türkiye is always welcomed constructively and positively by the majority of Lebanese. Aside from tourism and trade, the cultural ties that the Lebanese have formed with the

³²“Hizbullah Lideri Nasrallah: Bedelini ödersiniz”, *Hürriyet*, accessed 26 June, 2021, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/hizbullah-lideri-nasrallah-bedelini-odersiniz-40056018>.

³³ “ West behind failed Türkiye coup bid: Ex-Hezbollah chief”, *Anadolu Agency*, accessed 29 June, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/Türkiye/west-behind-failed-Türkiye-coup-bid-ex-hezbollah-chief/613744>.

³⁴ Hala Nehad Nasreddin, “Erdogan Aban Jadeed Li's Sunna?” *Daraj*, 2 February 2021, <https://daraj.com/65732/>.

Turkish community appear to be far from sectarianism. For example, in a study conducted with the participation of Lebanese students in 2017, it was reported that various issues such as Türkiye's relationship with the European Union, its touristic importance and natural resources are known by the students. This is an indication that students are interested in Türkiye and follow its news closely.³⁵ According to Loukieh's research, although the Ottoman Empire is described negatively in the Lebanese education system and history books, Lebanese people's travels to Türkiye indicate that they approach the country not from a historical perspective, but from a touristic perspective. It was determined that, except for a few participants in the research, most of the students observed Türkiye as a beautiful place.³⁶

4. Lebanon's Place in Türkiye's Levant Policy

Contrary to the arguments advanced with Neo-Ottoman enthusiasm in the Middle East, it is important to evaluate Lebanese policy in various concepts used by Turkish government in its foreign policy. One of the up-front concepts in strategies developed after the 2000s in this direction, is the concept of "vision orientation". Vision orientation consists of policies that directly and effectively intervene in crises from the beginning rather than policy-determining policies based on developments after the emergence of crises and problems in Türkiye's surrounding region.³⁷ Türkiye's contribution in 2008 with Qatar, which was a pioneer in the mediation role in the great crisis between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government, is an example of this.³⁸ In the same context, the mediation of Türkiye with Qatar in the 2011 government crisis in Lebanon exemplifies Türkiye's direct intervention policy in such tensions. However, even these mediation activities have been perceived occasionally in the Neo-Ottoman framework.³⁹

³⁵ Melissa Loukieh, "Lübnan'da Türkiye, Türkiye'de Lübnan İmgesi Üzerine Karşılaştırmalı Bir İmge Okuryazarlığı İncelemesi", (Master diss., Erciyes University, 2019), 132.

³⁶ Ibid, 132.

³⁷ Murat Yeşiltaş, Ali Balcı, "AK Parti Dönemi Türk Dış Politikası Sözlüğü: Kavramsal Bir Harita", *Bilgi Journal of Social Sciences*, 23, (Winter 2011): 13.

³⁸ "Relations between Türkiye and Lebanon", Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed 26 June, 2021,

<https://www.mfa.gov.tr/reasons-between-turkiye-and-lebanon.en.mfa>.

³⁹ "Erdogan in Beirut, a mediator on a Neo-Ottoman quest", Asian News, accessed 27 June, 2021,

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Erdogan-in-Beirut,-a-mediator-on-a-Neo-Ottoman-quest-20088.html>.

The term “economic interdependence” may also come to the fore in Turkish-Lebanese relations. At this point, the policy, which aims to contribute to Lebanon’s economy while maintaining its economic balance within the framework of the aforementioned trade agreements, can describe this concept.⁴⁰ At the same context, the Neo-Ottoman discourses, which are expressed with great concern in the Middle East generally and in Lebanon particularly, should be understood under the concept of “historical heritage and responsibility”:

“This concept, also known as “Ottoman heritage” and “historical depth”, serves to strengthen cultural and historical ties between the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia, and even Africa and Türkiye. As a result, Türkiye becomes culturally and historically linked to the geopolitical environment in which it finds itself.”⁴¹

Türkiye’s social initiatives in Lebanon need to be evaluated also in the nonsectarian context. To begin with, it must be known that in the aftermath of the Beirut explosion, Türkiye sent emergency aid to Lebanon regardless of sectarian affiliation. Armenia, for instance, sent relief only to the Armenian population of Lebanon and did not hesitate to say this openly.⁴² Similarly, among Lebanese politicians, the explosion was subjected to sectarian rhetoric. Some political actors in Lebanon addressed the pain caused by the blast to some groups. In this regard, the Ketaib Party’s member, Nadim Gamayel, described the explosion as “Christian pain” when Türkiye took a balanced and nonsectarian stance to the blast.⁴³ However, that Türkiye would grant citizenship to citizens of Turkish descent was a concern for some. The European Parliament claimed that the citizenship issue intended to resurrect the Ottoman caliphate by interfering with Türkiye’s social influence and establishing ideological commitment expressed concern with the wording “This decision risks upsetting the fragile balances in northern Lebanon.”⁴⁴ Yet, the Turkish former Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said in a statement, “We are a family. Ankara

⁴⁰ Yeşiltaş, Balcı, “AK Parti Dönemi Türk Dış Politikası Sözlüğü,” 22.

⁴¹ Ibid, 22.

⁴² “ Armenia Sends Humanitarian Aid to Beirut, Welcomes Repatriates”, Armenian Weekly, accessed 27 July 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2020/08/12/armenia-sends-humanitarian-aid-to-beirut-welcomes-repatriates/>.

⁴³“Beirut explosion: Sectarian pitch rises in the aftermath of destruction,” *The National Newspaper*, accessed 27 June, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/beirut-explosion-sectarian-pitch-rises-in-the-aftermath-of-destruction-1.1061912>.

⁴⁴ “Turkish interference in Lebanon”, *European Parliament*, accessed 28 June, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2021-001694_EN.html.

stands with the Lebanese people without any discrimination between Sunnis, Shias, Christians, or Arabs.”⁴⁵

The activities of TİKA are another important issue that must be addressed on the Lebanon-Türkiye axis. With its social activities, TİKA quickly became an important intermediary in Turkish foreign policy, serving as a bridge between Türkiye and the countries with which it shares a common historical heritage. It has always been emphasized that the Turkish government built a hospital in Sayda, where there is a high concentration of Sunni population. Furthermore, the restoration of the clock tower and other Ottoman artifacts built during II. Abdülhamid’s reign may be seen as supporting Neo-Ottoman initiatives. However, there was no mention of the Greek Orthodox church that TİKA restored in 2015. On the other hand, various social projects were carried out by TİKA, including trainings for young people regardless of whether their origins are Druze, Christian, or Sunni in the Shouf region, where the majority of the population is the Druze. Similarly, at the request of the American University of Beirut, various agricultural workshops and laboratories were reconstructed in the Bekaa region, which is primarily populated by Shiites, and farmers were given training without sectarian discrimination. Again, thanks to the collaboration with the municipality of Dbayeh, where Christians are concentrated, social projects such as solar lighting panels are carried out. TİKA’s activities also include the establishment of 12 virtual courts at the request of the Maronite Minister of Justice.⁴⁶

When all of these projects and initiatives are considered, it is clear that in Turkish foreign policy Turkish-Lebanese relations do not necessarily entail an Ottoman emphasis. However, recent political developments have caused Türkiye’s Lebanon policy to be reevaluated under the Ottoman emphasis. Because of the allegations that Türkiye is approaching Lebanon in the context of its activities in Syria and Libya, for example, Erdoğan has been dubbed as the “new sultan”.⁴⁷ However, the significance of the bridge that Türkiye has built directly through its own initiatives rather than through any party or group in Lebanon is clear to many observers.

⁴⁵ “Cumhurbaşkanı Yardımcısı Oktay: Lübnan'a yardımlarımız devam edecek”, *Anadolu Ajansı*, accessed 04.10. 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/cumhurbaskani-yardimcisi-oktay-lubnana-yardimlarimiz-devam-edecek/1935601>.

⁴⁶ Interview with Orhan Aydın, Officer of TİKA Beirut, 28 June 2021.

⁴⁷ Mohanad Hage Ali, “New Sultan on the Block”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 24 August 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/82554>.

5. Conclusion

Neo-Ottomanism, a modern idea, was shaped in the context of Türkiye's Middle East policies. As a result, Türkiye's relations with Arab countries and proactive policy were portrayed as attempting to bring all of the former Ottoman territory under one roof. The abolition of visas, increased trade volume and more cultural integration through Turkish TV series have all contributed to a renewed focus on Neo-Ottomanism in Türkiye's Middle East perspective.

One of the prominent countries in Türkiye's Middle East policy is Lebanon. Political, commercial, and cultural relations between Türkiye and Lebanon have progressed rapidly and positively since the 2000s. In this regard, the positive relations brought significant gains both for the Turkish and Lebanese people. However, beginning to have frequent contact between Türkiye and Lebanon led to a discourse in the global media that Türkiye intends to establish a new Ottoman hegemony in Lebanon.

The increasing activism of Türkiye toward Lebanon has also led to reactions from some political and sectarian groups in Lebanon. According to the conclusion reached in this study, some of the negative opinions formed about Türkiye seem reflections of Lebanon's perception of historical facts. In Lebanon, the evaluation of Ottoman policies through the lens of World War I forms the basis of the current perception and is sometimes mentioned depending on political developments. In this context, within the framework of the ideological approaches of some sectarian groups, Türkiye was seen by some as a continuation of the Ottoman Empire. However, it has been emphasized in the study the Ottoman perspective is not the same among sectarian groups. On the other hand, Türkiye's comprehensive approach to Lebanon and its non-sectarian political understanding have refuted claims that it is the "protector of the Sunnis".

Türkiye's recent efforts in Lebanon as well as its attitude toward sects suggest that it does not adhere to a rigorous ideology. Political remarks about the safeguarding of the territorial integrity of Middle Eastern countries in particular demonstrate the state's sensitivity to the central administration. Furthermore, Neo-Ottomanism entails fortifying ties through conserving cultural and historical connection rather than uniting under a unified Turkish flag.

The mediations attempted to prevent the breakdown of the country's unity indicate this in the face of the volatility generated by the political system in Lebanon. Lebanon is a country with a shared history with Türkiye in addition to its intrinsically strategic location in the eastern Mediterranean.

This collaboration does not have a hegemonic or exploitative goal. On the other hand, since the Ottoman perception created in Lebanon was placed on an unfounded ground the reaction to Türkiye's current approach also comes to light. Therefore, in order to understand the vision of Türkiye in Lebanon, it is important to eliminate the historical division first.

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