Hezbollah losses strengthen Turkey against Iran: analysts

AFP – Israel's onslaught against Hezbollah in Lebanon is reassuring for Turkey, which could seize the opportunity to strengthen its regional influence in the face of its rival Iran, analysts told AFP.

Despite being one of Israel's fiercest critics, Turkey has been measured in its response to the blows struck against the Shiite militant group, armed and financed by Tehran, including the killing of its leader Hassan Nasrallah.

"Hezbollah's decapitation diminishes the influence of Turkey's topmost regional rival, Iran, and is not something Turkey would cry over," said Asli Aydintasbas, a Turkey expert at the Brookings Institution, a US think tank.

– Erdogan lukewarm on Hezbollah –

Turkey's Sunni President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been unsparing in denouncing Israel since the start of its devastating assault on Gaza last year following a deadly attack by Palestinian militant group Hamas.

But he has not directly reacted to Hezbollah's recent losses in public – though his foreign minister Hakan Fidan hailed Nasrallah after his killing.

"If it translates into a longer-term weakening of Iran and allied Shiite groups, including Hezbollah, that will really pave the way for Turkey to play a more dominant role" in Syria and Iraq, said Gonul Tol, Turkey director for the Middle East Institute, a research centre in Washington.

– Turkey's influence in Syria –

Analysts suggest Turkey is satisfied by the setback for

Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran, largely because of their support for Bashar al-Assad, leader of neighbouring Syria.

Turkey and Hezbollah "are hardly on the same page when it comes to regional issues, particularly in Syria where the latter supports the regime and is complicit in the war crimes Assad has committed", said Ozgur Unluhisarcikli of the German Marshall Fund, a US think tank.

The civil war between Assad and his rivals has destabilised Turkey's southern border, thrusting millions of refugees onto its territory.

"From a Turkish perspective, Iran and Hezbollah are the reasons Syria is in the mess that it is," Aydintasbas said.

– Pro-Palestinian, not pro-Hezbollah –

Erdogan has accused Israel of "genocide" of Palestinians in its assault on Gaza and branded Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a war criminal.

Netanyahu has rejected the claim, saying Israel must crush the Islamist group Hamas in the territory to prevent further attacks and free hostages seized by the militants.

Analysts say Turkey's sympathy for the Palestinians – who like Erdogan are Sunni Muslims – does not extend to support for Iran, Hezbollah and their other Shiite allies in the region, such as the Huthis in Yemen and factions in Iraq.

"Though opinions in Turkiye vary on Nasrallah's death and Hezbollah's losses, it's evident that Turkiye is less concerned about these losses compared to those of Hamas," said Unluhisarcikli, using the country's official Turkish name.

– Gaza security prospects –

Observers say Erdogan wants to cast himself as a leader among Sunni states – notably where the future security of Gaza is

concerned.

He hosted Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in September and likely discussed “a wider coordinating role” for their countries in Gaza after the conflict, said Sinan Ciddi, a Turkish politics expert at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a Washington-based nonprofit.

Analysts say Erdogan’s tirades against Israel may have compromised his potential role as a mediator in the region.

But on other fronts, “Ankara is very cautious in what it says and does as its relations with Iran are always sensitive,” Aydintasbas said.

“Turkey is clearly worried about even greater regional escalation and an all-out war between Iran and Israel, with unpredictable implications. It would do all it can to stay out.”

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