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Saudi Arabian uncertainties in Lebanon (January 2011 – January 2017)

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Since the fall of Saad Hariri's government in January of 2011, the resignation of Shia ministers and their Christian allies, and the demonstration of Hezbollah's power in the streets of Beirut, Saudi policy towards Lebanon can be divided into two main phases.

The first, from February 2011 to January 2015, is characterized by a certain passivity while avoiding any form of political escalation within the country.

The second, which started in February of 2015, consisted of temporarily abandoning Lebanon in favour of pursuing other priorities.

However, this phase could shift in the coming months as American President Donald Trump's policies in Iran and the Middle East become clearer¹.

I – 2011-2015: A concerned and shaken Saudi Arabia favours maintaining the Lebanese status quo

Since the beginning of the Arab revolutions, the Saudi regime's anxiety was obvious. The "Peninsula Shield" intervention in Bahrain that supported the Khalifa regime (March 2011), the search for political compromise (between the opposition and President Saleh) in Yemen (in 2011 and 2012), and the announcement of new social spending and anti-corruption measures within the kingdom (March 2011), all revealed Riyadh's nervousness regarding regional flare-ups.

Concerning Lebanon, the fall of Saad Hariri's government surprised Saudi officials. It happened just as they lost control of a number of foreign policy issues. The fact that this fall was followed by a change in alliances – Walid Jumblatt permitted the formation of a new government led by Najib Mikati, excluding Hariri² – reflected a transformation in the political balance of power within Lebanon. Saudi Arabia failed to react to these developments, given that Riyadh was more concerned with developments in Syria and Iraq at the time.

It is thus that the Saudi tendency to neglect and abandon Lebanon came into focus, being marked by three particular developments:

The first is that the Saudis disapproved of new Prime Minister Najib Mikati's legitimacy as a Sunni leader, but did not boycott him.

¹ The Saudis count on an American foreign policy that is hostile towards Iran and opposed to Tehran's political (and military) expansionism in the Middle East.

² Walid Jumblatt and his supports politically repositioned themselves, depriving both Hariri and the March 14th movement of the parliamentary majority they had held since 2009.

Next following Mikati's resignation in March 2013, was the approval of Tammam Salam's nomination as Prime Minister; Salam was close to both Riyadh and Hariri. Given that Michel Suleiman's presidential term was drawing to a close and the impossibility of electing a new president, Tammam Salam decided to outline "minimum guaranties" required for Lebanon not to align itself with Iran.

Meanwhile, developments in Syria had already sent hundreds of thousands of Syrian and Palestinian refugees towards Lebanon; at the same time, Hezbollah was busy fighting to keep Assad in power. While Lebanon maintained a degree of flexibility required to cater to Saudi Arabia's priorities, the Lebanese state's involvement in Syria was for the most part dominated by Hezbollah.

The third such development occurred towards the end of 2014, signalling that the Saudis would disengage from the Lebanese arena. Sunni politics became fragmented after Saad Hariri's fall, his absence within the country, and the increasing influence of Ashraf Rifi (a former Hariri follower and leader of the internal security forces)³ and Salafist groups (found in Tripoli as well as regions near the Syrian border)⁴. Hariri's fall reflected the tensions within the kingdom at the time of King Abdullah's succession. Meanwhile, former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and Bahiya Hariri, a legislative deputy, tried to preserve the Future Movement's (Hariri's political movement) unity, which had for months been deprived of a large part of its financial resources.

Furthermore, in Yemen, the Saudis were confronted by a new military challenge as Houthi militias entered into an alliance with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The alliance launched a massive offensive, allowing them to control a large part of Yemen's territory (including Aden in the south) and threaten the entrance to the Red Sea. In light of the strong ties linking the Houthi movement and Tehran, Riyadh considered Houthi advances as Iran directly threatening Saudi territory.

³ Rifi and Saudi authorities were always close. Observers realised that the Saudis encouraged Rifi as he defected from Hariri's party. However, none of this is officially confirmed.

⁴ These groups are often financed by non-governmental Salafist networks in Kuwait. They profit from the Lebanese Sunni population's anger towards Hezbollah, which arises from the frustration of not having "strong" enough Sunni leaders to face up to the movement.

2 – The Salman Era: prioritisation of Yemen and the conflict with Hezbollah

Prince Salman's accession to the throne in January of 2015, after the death of King Abdullah, led to the return of the Sudairis⁵ to power. Immediately thereafter, preparations were made for Salman's own succession (born in 1935), which would, for the first time, be vertical and within the Sudairi clan⁶.

From his first few weeks on, the King and his son Mohammad, the second Crown Prince and Defense Minister, became more aggressive with Iran than had been their predecessors. While Lebanon remained bereft of any political options and Iraq without strong allies, the Saudi approach involved providing substantial support to the opposition in Syria, which allowed them to achieve important military successes in the spring and early summer of 2015.

Yet, Saudi Arabia is the most militarily and financially invested in Yemen, through its "Operation Decisive Storm", launched against the Houthis and Saleh for the purpose of taking back the regions they are occupying. This operation did not succeed in mobilising Sisi's Egypt nor the Arab League, as Riyadh had desired (which showed the limits of its regional influence, even vis-à-vis the new Egyptian president that they supported).

Meanwhile, Saudi authorities toughened measures against Shia opponents and Sunni jihadists. The first Crown Prince (the King's nephew) and Interior Minister, Muhammad bin Nayef, tried to impose himself as the kingdom's strong-man.

Saad Hariri seemed to be disconnected from this new Saudi agenda. His influence in the kingdom was jeopardized and his concerns unheeded. This had a knock-on effect in Lebanon, where Saad Hariri was unable to pay the salaries of a large number of employees in his media organizations, the closing of many social and medical centers run by his political movement, and by a growing rumor regarding his loss of Saudi support.

In September of 2015, Russia's intervention in Syria tipped the balance in favor of the Assad regime. Negotiations between Russians and Americans gradually removed the Saudis from Syria and Jordan (until they were not involved at all) while the progress of negotiations between Americans, Western countries, and Iranians on nuclear issues concerned Riyadh. In addition, indirect cooperation between the American army and air force, the government, and pro-Iranian forces in Baghdad (against Daesh) was equally

⁵ Seven brothers make up the Sudairi clan, a subset of the royal al-Saud family. Amongst them are the former King Fahd and the current King Salman. Many former Crown Princes or influential royal persons are also from the seven, such as Sultan and Nayef.

⁶ Saudi Arabia had a vertical succession for the first time since the death of its founder King Ibn Saud in 1953. Until then, all successions had been horizontal (from brother to brother).

worrying. Saudis saw Iranian expansionism become significantly more threatening by the year's end.

Therefore, Riyadh decided to become more involved on a regional level. Despite a number of setbacks, its war in Yemen has intensified. Its drive to unite the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led to a rapprochement with Doha. Only the sultanate of Oman has kept well clear of the kingdom.

Within Saudi Arabia, officials executed opponents in January 2016, including the Shia sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. This act triggered riots in the east of the country and neighboring Bahrain. In Lebanon, Hezbollah media denounced Saudi policies, sparking Saudi anger.

Lately, the GCC fought back by banning Gulf nationals from traveling to Lebanon. They also expelled tens of Shia Lebanese nationals from Riyadh, Manama, and Abu Dhabi back to Lebanon. In February, the Saudis rescinded a 3 billion dollar investment that would have helped Beirut purchase French weaponry. Escalation continued in March as the member states of the GCC (except for Oman) labelled Hezbollah a terrorist organization.

At the same time, Hariri's financial issues continued and his company operating in Saudi Arabia, "Saudi Oger", suffered, **as did hundreds of those employed in his institutions in Lebanon. However, a number of legal cases caught up with him, as well as his family circle.** All of this happened against a backdrop of rumors that tensions existed between Hariri and the two Crown Princes⁷.

Saudi disengagement from Lebanese politics was felt in June 2016 during municipal elections that resulted in heavy losses for Saad Hariri. He lost Tripoli (the second largest city in the country) to Ashraf Rifi. He barely won in the capital against a "citizen's" list, despite the alliances he had made with most Lebanese political groups (including the Christian Aounists and the Shia Amal movement).

The presidential elections at the end of October 2016, which were held after more than two years without a president, were not indicative of a Saudi desire to return to Lebanon. It was rather the absence of Saudi interests that led to a compromise being made between Hariri, Michel Aoun, and Hezbollah. Hezbollah, reassured by the Russian intervention in Syria, no longer fears the election of a president. Hariri, who understood that his political and economic survival depended on his return to power in Beirut, helped ensure that the vote was held. His nomination as prime minister in return for

⁷ For Muhammad bin Nayef, relations have dramatically degraded since Hariri claimed – in front of an international commission investigating the assassination of his father – that the Saudi prince is "brutal" and is similar to Syrian general Assef Shawkat (al-Assad's brother-in-law). Regarding Muhammad bin Salman, he is part of a Saudi generation that considers that they are better suited than Hariri (and foreigners) for managing large projects within the kingdom.

Aoun's election as president placed him in a better position to be able to mend ties with Saudi Arabia.

3 – Some scenarios

Despite President Aoun's visit to Saudi Arabia on January 11 2017, the Saudi position has not seemed to budge. Although Aoun wanted to reassure the Saudis by choosing Riyadh as his first foreign visit after his election, he also wanted to position himself as the kingdom's most credible partner. This was not necessarily part of a bid to compete with Hariri (who still has tensions with the Saudis). His primary desire was to put an end to a weak Maronite presidency, whose authority had been reduced since the Taif Agreement, as well as by prime minister Rafic Hariri outshining him. Aoun wanted to bring about the return of a strong presidency, capable of managing the country at every levels.

For Riyadh, Yemen and Saudi domestic issues remain the largest priorities. On one hand, the Yemeni war seems to drag on without coming to a decisive end. On the other, the rivalry between the two Crown Princes (Mohammad bin Nayef and Mohammad bin Salman) and power centers is intensifying in the race to towards the first vertical succession.

Today, the Saudis, devoid of allies in Iraq, rightly understand their lack influence in the country. Additionally, the Obama administration's policies, which indirectly allowed the Russians and the Iranians to insert themselves in Syria, led to the Saudis being expelled from the country from the get-go. This removal from the picture was recently brought to the fore during the three-way patronage (negotiations held between the regime and opponents) made up of Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara.

Consequently, the Saudis are impatiently waiting for the clarification of Donald Trump's Iran policy.

Concerning Lebanon, the Saudis "put on hold" the implementation of new punitive measures targeting Lebanon following Aoun's visit. In return, they received a softer treatment from Hezbollah's media outlets. This was recently seen when the execution of Shia opponents in Bahrain was greeted with a fairly calm response (mid-January 2017).

For the most part, the Saudis do not seem to consider removing their boycott of Lebanon's tourism and finance sectors. They are even less likely to reconsider their position regarding Hezbollah, especially with Trump in Washington.

This said, they will soon have to decide what to do with Hariri.

It should be noted that Hariri, who made a “comeback” in recovering his popular voter base, will have to win the next parliamentary elections (planned for May 2017) if the Saudis want to install a new uncontested Sunni leader. Currently, it is difficult to know if these elections will take place or if they will be postponed, due to the debate regarding the electoral law⁸. What is certain, however, is that they will be decisive for Hariri and important for the Saudis.

Finally, two scenarios seem possible concerning future developments:

First of all, the Saudis could be content with observing the election from a distance and shaping their policies according to the result. The Saudis will, as always, establish ties with “notable” Sunnis (and political blocs across the country).

Secondly, the Saudis could decide to help Hariri in gathering the largest number of partners, in order to secure a parliamentary majority. This would create new government dominated by their allies. To do this, they would have to appeal to political actors both Christian (“Lebanese Forces”, the “Kataeb” party, as well as independents) and Druze (Jumblatt), rallying their Sunni followers behind Hariri in the process. This would require providing Hariri with substantial financial aid as well as bailing out his ailing business interests in Saudi Arabia.

Regardless of the scenario, it is clear that an important shift took place in the relationship between the Lebanese Sunni community and Riyadh. The leaders of the community (including Hariri and those who defected from his leadership) consider that it is necessary to first establish popular legitimacy and political skill in order to establish themselves as allies or “representatives” of Saudi Arabia in Lebanon. These leaders must show themselves to be “strong” in Lebanon to open up opportunities in Saudi Arabia. Things used to work the other way round – legitimacy was first and foremost sought in Riyadh.

⁸ The debate surrounding the law pits two sides against each other: the Aoun-Hezbollah axis, which supports a proportional system; and the alliance between Hariri, Jumblatt and the current head of Parliament Nabih Berri, which want to maintain the law (in place since 1960) adopted during the previous elections in 2009.