

What Are Saudi Arabia's Intentions in Lebanon?

By: [Jean Aziz for Al-Monitor Lebanon Pulse](#) Posted on [April 17](#).

A few days ago, Lebanon commemorated the 38th anniversary of the outbreak of the civil war that began on April 13, 1975. Remarkably, the occasion was acknowledged in the absence of a government and, to an extent, a parliament. Some predict that Lebanon is headed toward a presidential election crisis in May 2014 unless a recent initiative by Saudi Arabia succeeds. Is there really such an initiative, however?

About This Article

Summary :

Saudi Arabia has increased its diplomatic efforts in Lebanon, and Jean Aziz asks what exactly Riyadh's intentions are.

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What Is Riyadh Doing in Beirut?

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Since the [resignation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati](#) on March 22, there has been talk of a Saudi effort to reconcile rival Lebanese forces. The Saudis were reportedly among the international actors who encouraged or perhaps asked Mikati to step aside. Also, Saudi Arabia had a clear role in naming the person, [Tammam Salam](#), assigned to form a new government. Before the necessary constitutional steps were taken in this regard, the MP from Beirut traveled to Riyadh, where he met with a number of officials, most notably, Bandar Bin Sultan, the kingdom's intelligence chief. Following this meeting, the constitutional steps, as if mere formalities, were finalized, and Salam was pronounced prime minister-designate.

Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, a prominent warlord during the civil war, said explicitly that Bandar had asked him to name someone to replace Mikati and that he himself had convinced the Saudis to choose Salam. At this point, talk began of a new [Saudi tutelage over Lebanon](#), and various interpretations were offered. Some said that the Saudis intended to [replace the Syrian role](#), which receded during the early part of the civil war in Syria and today has ceased to exist.

Others theorized that the Saudis are “concerned” about Qatar's role in Syria and, by extension, in Lebanon. Qatari money is flowing to jihadist forces different from those supported by Saudi Arabia. This has led to cases of

undisciplined fundamentalism, which the Saudis fear could transform into a beast and turn on them, as happened with the "Arab Afghans" and the rise of Osama bin Laden, "son of the Saudi regime," and beginnings of al-Qaeda.

According to another theory, Saudi Arabia has only recently taken notice of the [gas field](#) discovered in the eastern Mediterranean and has decided not to leave this new strategic asset to a competitor, be it Qatar, Turkey or Russia.

Whatever the reasons or motive, it is clear that Saudi Arabia has returned to play a major role in Beirut. It seems, however, to be keen not to appear as the new guardian or as biased toward the pro-Saudi Sunni group in that bloc's political struggle with the other Lebanese parties, especially the Shiites and Christians. In the past two weeks, the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon, Awad al-Asiri, has said that what is required is a "government that satisfies everyone."

In an exclusive interview, Asiri told *Al-Monitor* that his country is working to reconcile all Lebanese parties, without exception. He firmly denied Jumblatt's assertion that the Saudi intelligence chief had intervened in the naming of the Lebanese prime minister. He expressed surprise at Jumblatt's statements, saying he does not know why he may have said them. He noted that Bandar is not in charge of Lebanese issues in Riyadh, a point of some importance.

Asiri added that Lebanese affairs are restricted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in particular, to Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal and his deputy Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah. Naming Abdullah as one of the Saudi officials in Riyadh in charge of Lebanese affairs is significant. Abdullah is the son of the current king, one of the last Saudi friends of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the most prominent Saudi envoy to Damascus during the days of negotiation between the two countries aimed at reaching a settlement of the Lebanese crisis. The Saudi ambassador firmly expressed his optimism that the upcoming period would be good for the Lebanese people.

This optimism coincides with Saudi efforts to reinforce Salam in his task of forming a new government. This is especially so after the emergence of difficulties given that the Hariri deputies, the traditional allies of Saudi Arabia, have refused to give their Christian and Shiite opponents parallel representation quotas in the next government.

In the face of intransigence by Riyadh's "local agents" in Beirut, Saudi Arabia requested holding direct talks with the March 14 opponents. This demand translated into a visit by former Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri to Paris to meet with [Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros al-Rai](#), who was there on a scheduled appointment with French President François Hollande. It was the first time that Hariri had met with the Maronite patriarch since January 2011, the date on which his government resigned. According to information obtained exclusively by *Al-Monitor*, Saudi Arabia's point man in Beirut informed the most prominent church official in Lebanon that the March 14 alliance intends to cooperate and open channels with all parties to avert a crisis over the formation of a government, agree on an election law and then hold elections.

Al-Monitor also learned that secret communications have taken place between Saudi diplomats in Beirut and officials close to Hezbollah, the most powerful Shiite organization in Lebanon and the key opponent of Hariri's Sunni bloc. Similar meetings also took place between the Saudis and officials affiliated with the party of Gen. Michel Aoun, the most powerful Christian leader. The Saudis have expressed to both parties their desire to initiate a Lebanese dialogue leading to a comprehensive solution in Lebanon.

For the time being, however, it has not materialized. Good intentions are not enough. They need to be translated into two clear equations: the formation of the government and a "non-Saudi" quota in it, as well as the [electoral law](#) and whether the "Saudis" will accept adopting a new, fair law as opposed to the current unfair law.

In the 2009 elections, the current law allowed the Saudi allies to win 14 seats more than their opponents, who captured 145,000 more votes, an odd electoral glitch possible under the existing election law. More important, however, a resolution of the law issue would require regional guarantees, such as a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement or US-Iranian détente. In the absence of regional support of this kind, local players fear that the Saudi role will turn out to be mere political maneuvering aimed at luring opponents into a double ambush — the formation of a government and elections — in order to isolate and then deal a blow to them.

Some say that Saudi Arabia's declared intentions in Beirut are good. Verifying these intentions could, however, be linked to the Saudi position in Bahrain, the Iranian position in Yemen and even the Almaty talks. The quotas in the Lebanese government and parliament might correspond to numbers related to Iran's uranium enrichment more than to the number of Lebanese votes.

The issue is strange but understandable in Beirut, whose civil war is often referred to as the "wars of others on our land."