

“Unfriending” Lebanon: Saudi Arabia Breaks Its Own Lebanese Taboos

Two chief factors usually come to mind regarding the nature of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah. First, that it is dominated by the violence Hezbollah has—since its inception—sought to export to, implant or practice in Saudi Arabia, and second, Saudi responses to Hezbollah's actions. Certainly, however, other considerations have influenced the rapport between those two entities, despite one being a “state” and the other a non-state proxy.

Assuming that a fundamental aspect of this relationship is that it is shaped (in part) by the nature of Saudi-Iranian relations and—at least until the Syrian uprising began in 2011—by those between Saudi Arabia and Syria, then it must also be understood that Saudi-Hezbollah relations exist within this larger background, which has alternated between periods of escalation and de-escalation in recent decades. Stated otherwise, beyond all of the very theatrical setbacks that have

affected Saudi-Hezbollah relations, periodic improvements have also been apparent. Yet while those upswings have never garnered the kind of coverage typically devoted to blunders, setbacks and outright errors, they are, nevertheless, part of the history that should be written about that relationship.

In assessing the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah since the assassination of Rafic Hariri, for example, it is apparent that even when relations were strained after the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel and during the inter-Lebanese “wrestling match” that followed, the two entities continued the intermittent exchange of friendly messages. Those communications peaked in January 2007, when a Hezbollah delegation (which included vice secretary general Sheikh Naim Kassem and Minister Mohammad Fneish) was invited by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz to engage with him in Saudi Arabia.¹ That détente assumed even

¹ For further information, see Hezbollah's official statement on the event in the January 5, 2007 edition of *an-Nahar*.

greater dimensions in July 2010 when King Abdullah and Syrian President Bashar Assad visited Beirut. Interestingly, the fact that Abdullah had the Syrian president in tow after Assad was accused of collaborating with Hezbollah to assassinate Rafic Hariri (Saudi Arabia personified) says a great deal about the prevailing Abdullah policy, which was focused on preserving “regional order” at any cost. In Lebanese terms, that translated to advocating “closing the file” on the Hariri assassination and the July 2006 war, which Saudi Arabia characterized as an “uncalculated adventure.”² That penchant for openness remained alive even after Hezbollah became involved in the Syrian uprising. On March 18, 2013, for instance, the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon gave reassurances during an interview with *as-Safir* that not only would his country not boycott any Lebanese “side,” but also that “our doors and hearts are open [to maintaining contact with Hezbollah].”³

In view of the foregoing, the measures taken recently by the Saudis, up to and including labeling Hezbollah a “terrorist” organization, require careful examination for two, primary

reasons. First, the dramatic move taken by the Saudis is not representative of the characteristically ponderous and conservative diplomacy that country has practiced in the past. Second, the Saudi actions are proving to be more comprehensive than efforts taken simply to punish Iran’s juvenile proxy organization (Hezbollah), as they also reflect the outcome of an exhaustive review of Lebanon’s status vis-à-vis the “revised” Saudi concept of the region. Indeed, a novel feature of this “new” Saudi approach is that, in apparently accepting Hezbollah as a bona fide component of the Lebanese landscape, Saudi Arabia also appears insistent on the “Lebanese” taking responsibility for Hezbollah’s actions. But *while Saudi Arabia is by no means attempting to usurp Iran’s responsibility where Hezbollah is concerned, it is trying to separate its state-to-state relations with Iran from those with Lebanon, as well as its state-to-non-state relations with Hezbollah!*

Regardless of the many points of contention between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah, the two at least seem to agree that the “attitudes” they have toward each other reached a point of no return when the Saudis launched *Operation*

² Regarding King’s Abdullah approach, see: Armin Rosen, “King Abdullah’s Successful Reign Raises Troubling Questions About The Middle East’s Future,” *Business Insider*, January 23, 2015. The article asks pointedly, “Will the Saudi-led order that Abdullah steered with such apparent vision and skill come crashing apart as well?” <http://www.businessinsider.com/king-abdullahs-reign-raises-troubling-questions-about-the-middle-east-s-future-2015-1>

³ *As-Safir*, March 18, 2013.

Decisive Storm in Yemen on March 26, 2005.⁴ Less than 24 hours after that operation commenced, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech that was extremely critical of the Saudi government and its intervention. In that address, Nasrallah not only accused Saudi Arabia of trying to subjugate Yemen against the wishes of its population, but also of having created ISIL (Daesh), accusing them of being “lazy, indolent and failures and conspiring against the Palestinians.”⁵ Even people who were typically supportive of Hezbollah were surprised at the aggressiveness of Nasrallah’s speech, especially since Iranian reaction to the intervention was, ostensibly, restrained.⁶ In a March 1, 2016 speech, Nasrallah admitted that he had crossed a boundary when he referred to his March 27, 2015 address as the “most honorable thing I have done in my life,” and “greater than the July war [of 2006].”⁷

On April 7, less than two weeks after that first speech, Nasrallah reiterated his criticism of the Saudi establishment and its royal family in a lengthy interview conducted by a pro-Assad regime television network. The reality of the situation

was that, had the interview not been broadcast live on Tele-Liban, a network funded by the Lebanese State, Nasrallah's vitriol could have been dismissed as tired propaganda. To make matters worse, the political programming director for Tele-Liban is also a trusted advisor to Saad Hariri. Enraged, Saudi Arabia demanded an apology from the Lebanese authorities. However, Lebanese officials—even those considered “friends” of the Saudis—declined to take a clear stand on the matter, and the absence of an “official” response not only increased Saudi antipathy toward Hezbollah, but also prompted questions about the dependability of its so-called Lebanese friends when serious matters were at stake.

A brief discussion of Saad Hariri's situation immediately prior to Saudi Arabia's fit of anger with Lebanon may seem tangential to this topic, but it is, in fact, germane. After all, gaining a complete understanding of the changing relations between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia requires that the topic be viewed as proceeding along two separate, but related tracks: Saad Hariri and the host of Saudi Arabia's fair-weather friends in Lebanon, and Hezbollah, supplemented

⁴ Regarding the regional context within which this operation was launched and the interplay between the Syrian and Yemeni theaters of operation, see ShiaWatch Alert #37, “Quo Vadis Hezbollah? The Perplexity of being a Better Royalist than the King,” <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/622>

⁵ <http://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=29009&cid=562#.Vufp29J97ow>

⁶ Further information about the debate caused by Nasrallah's speech, see ShiaWatch Alert #37, “Quo Vadis Hezbollah? The Perplexity of being a Better Royalist than the King,” <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/622>

⁷ <http://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=29009&cid=562#.Vufp29J97ow>

by numerous other enemies of the kingdom in Lebanon. Thus, gaining a dependable perspective on Hariri's circumstances begins by following the trail of Saudi Arabia's increasing despair with its historic Lebanese "assets" (particularly Hariri) and its changed perception of Hezbollah. Moreover, understanding the revised approach the Saudis are taking toward Lebanon (and elsewhere) demands some awareness of both, though fundamental differences exist in Saudi Arabia's decision to trim the "Hariri asset" and the kingdom's need to confront the emergent Hezbollah "blight."

Following the death of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, a series of domestic Saudi "disgraces" involving several high profile individuals gave ample indication that things were not only changing in the kingdom, but also for Saad Hariri and his family members.⁸ During that time, Saad Hariri continued to "sit tight" in Saudi Arabia hoping to see some miraculous improvements in his personal (business) and political circumstances. While so occupied, however, Saudi officials and other "concerned" notables hinted to Hariri that if he truly wanted a "second chance," it would not happen if he remained sequestered

\$3 + \$1 Billion!

Consider the circumstances under which Saudi Arabia promised first \$3 billion and then another \$1 billion in aid to Lebanon. The \$3 billion Saudi aid package was announced during a December 29, 2013 television address by former Lebanese President Michel Suleiman. In general, the message behind Suleiman's presentation was a reiteration of the claim made by the now defunct March 14 Alliance that the State should monopolize the possession of arms (i.e., that Hezbollah should be disarmed). Interestingly, that Saudi pledge was made just prior to the "International Conference on Support to Lebanese Armed Forces" held in Rome on June 17, 2014.¹ From the domestic perspective, announcement of the Saudi aid package occurred just two days after former anti-Hezbollah minister Mohammad Chatah was assassinated and the day before LAF media services disclosed that Lebanese anti-aircraft artillery targeted Syrian helicopters over Orsal—a premiere in the annals of the Lebanese military.^{2,3}

Saad Hariri announced the \$1 billion Saudi aid package during a press conference held in Riyadh on August 6, 2014. That donation was dedicated to the LAF and "Lebanese security [agencies]," and no further identification of the beneficiaries involved was made.⁴ In that case, the announcement was made immediately after the August 2 battle of Orsal during which several LAF soldiers and members of the Internal Security Forces were captured by an-Nusra Front and ISIL (Daesh). Although a deal made with an-Nusra Front led to the December 2015 release of the POWs under its control, the fate of those captured by ISIL remains unknown.

¹ <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/pa14.doc.htm>

² <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/12/27/world/meast/lebanon-explosion/>

³ See Lebanese dailies dated December 31, 2013.

⁴ Saad Hariri's press conference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VH4oXYnT56M>

⁸ The most noteworthy disgrace following the death of King Abdullah involved the al-Tuwaijri family. For further information, see "Rise and fall of Saudi Arabia's al-Tuwaijri family," *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, January 28, 2015. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/features/2015/1/28/rise-and-fall-of-saudi-arabias-al-tuwaijri-family>

in Riyadh. Accordingly, he was advised to resolve the financial problems he was experiencing with his brothers and reassert himself—in *Beirut*—as the primus inter pares of Lebanon's Sunni community. As a Saudi diplomat mentioned during a private conversation with ShiaWatch in fall 2015:

It seems that Saad, like a large number of our Lebanese friends, had a problem believing that SA is at war. Consequently, they missed the basic idea that *friendship works in times of peace. But in times of war, you need to be an ally.*

While Hariri remained intransigent, calls for his return were being echoed by a number of "certified" Saudi mouthpieces. Some of the most urgent calls were made by Ahmad Adnan, a former counselor to Abdul Aziz Khoja who served as Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Lebanon from 2004 to 2009 and is now that country's ambassador to Morocco. Adnan, who between assignments was a journalist, wrote several editorials in which he disclosed some of Saad's business shortcomings (tantamount to the proverbial "stick") and offered advice on Saudi Arabia's expectations of him (akin to a "carrot").⁹

Following the collapse of Saad Hariri's government (choreographed expertly by Hezbollah to coincide with his arrival at the White House on January 12, 2011 to meet with President Obama), Hariri cited security concerns as the reason for his self-exile to several locations including Riyadh and Paris. Surprisingly, the situation changed when relations between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah were reaching an unprecedented period of escalation. Suddenly, however, those concerns vanished and Saad Hariri began planning his return to Lebanon! But Hariri's reappearance had to be incorporated into a very specific context, which emerged as an initiative aimed at ending the presidential vacancy Lebanon has endured since May 24, 2014 (when President Suleiman's tenure ended and he departed the Baabda presidential palace). On November 21, 2015, a number of Lebanese newspapers simultaneously reported news of a Paris meeting several days before, between Saad Hariri and Suleiman Frangieh, the outcome of which was former Prime Minister Hariri's pledge to support Frangieh as a candidate for the presidency.¹⁰ That announcement instantly roiled the long-stagnant Lebanese presidential waters, and the lion's share of the debate that

⁹ <http://www.alarab.co.uk/?id=60071>

¹⁰ Suleiman Frangieh is the namesake and grandson of Lebanon's president from 1970 – 1976. Since he is also a longtime friend of the Assad family and regime, he is consequently a Hezbollah ally.

followed explored the extent to which Hariri's decision (wildly unpopular within the Future Movement and among the larger Sunni community) had been suggested by Saudi Arabia—or possibly by the leadership "wing" headed by Mohammad bin Salman (the deputy crown prince). A December 4, 2015 phone call to Frangieh from French President Francois Hollande seemed to confirm the seriousness of Hariri's move. Yet, Saad Hariri's sensational and symbolic return to Lebanon and the country's political scene on February 14, 2016—timed to coincide with the eleventh anniversary of his father's assassination—quickly ran out of steam.¹¹

On January 18, Hariri's "historic" Christian ally Samir Geagea announced during a kitschy and pompous celebration that he had reconciled with General Michel Aoun (Geagea's own historic foe) and had given Aoun—a Hezbollah ally—his support as a candidate for the presidency! Then, on the eve of the 36th parliament session (planned for March 2) to elect a president of the republic, Suleiman Frangieh announced that neither he nor anyone from his bloc would attend any election

session unless "[that attendance] is coordinated with our allies"; i.e., Hezbollah! This political melodrama (assuming it really is political in nature) came full circle when Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Lebanon stated (much to Saad Hariri's chagrin), "[We] don't see a national consensus around [the candidacy of] Suleiman Frangieh."¹² Immediately before the ambassador's rather prophetic statement, the Saudi press had begun sending accusatory messages about Hariri's initiative vis-à-vis Saudi policy. In an unprecedented announcement, *Okaz*, a leading Saudi newspaper, reported that the Saudi ministry of labor had formed a commission to investigate the delay by Saad Hariri's *Saudi Oger* in paying its tens of thousands of employees!¹³ Since the Saudi press is a dependable outlet for the establishment, an accurate translation of that message would read, "Saad! Mind your business and stop meddling in those issues!"

Regardless of the "juicy details" that may ultimately be disclosed about the Saudis' "demotion" of Saad Hariri, it is clear that his image has suffered tremendously because of his failed presidential initiative. Beyond having been weakened personally and/or from

¹¹ When Saad Hariri was asked by a journalist on March 1 how long he would be remaining in Lebanon, Hariri confirmed that the length of his stay was open. Actually, he used a rather vulgar colloquial expression which roughly equates to "I'm here and I'm staying regardless of the wishes of those who don't want me to stay." <http://www.almustaqbal.org/content/40586>

¹² Interview of Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon by Thaer Ghandour, *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, March 29, 2016.

¹³ <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20160307/Con20160307827903.htm>

the perspective of his Future Movement, the situation again prompts questions about the future dynamics of the Lebanese Sunni community. Further, it facilitates an understanding of Saudi Arabia's decision to “walk away” from Lebanon by suspending its client-based participation in the Lebanese political game.¹⁴

Notably, Saudi-led *Operation Decisive Storm* (Yemen intervention) became an opportunity for the Saudi kingdom to highlight the success of its “shadow diplomacy,” which it pursued frequently with its Egyptian counterparts to neutralize the pro-Hezbollah “fifth column” within the Sunni community. While these efforts were disclosed first in August 2014 (and prompted the election of a new Mufti of the Lebanese Republic), they were showcased in conjunction with Operation Decisive Storm when several Sunni figures known for their affiliation with the “Resistance axis” either vocalized their support for Saudi Arabia or kept a low profile altogether by withholding support in view of Hezbollah's verbal attacks against the kingdom. But in contrast with the assumed conclusion, the payoffs from these Saudi breakthroughs within the Sunni community were not intended to benefit Saad Hariri or his leadership. In reality,

it is becoming evident that they are elements of a “revised” Saudi policy toward Lebanese Sunni, which prefers dealing with that community via multiple “entry points” (e.g., notables, charities, families) rather than through a centralized leadership body that gains its wherewithal through political and financial support provided by Saudi Arabia.

At this point in the discussion, it should be obvious that it is much easier to track the steady escalation between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah than it is to trace—and understand—the course Hariri seems to have charted for himself. To be sure, media coverage of the war of words between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah has not paused since March 2015. Nevertheless, Russian intervention in Syria and the quick change in the military situation that ensued (which not only rescued the Assad regime but also shackled freehanded Iranian intervention there) enabled Saudi Arabia to target Iran in Lebanon via Hezbollah. From the Saudi perspective, while recovery and eventual success may occur in Syria, there is nothing to be gained where Lebanon is concerned by maintaining its distinction between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government.

¹⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/03/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-cuts-billions-in-aid-to-lebanon-opening-door-for-iran.html?_r=2

While the venom being spewed between the two parties was still at a tolerable level in late 2015, more evidence of escalation appeared that December when Arabsat, the “leading satellite services provider in the Arab world,” stopped broadcasting pro-Hezbollah *al-Mayadeen* and Hezbollah's official network, *al-Manar*.¹⁵ That cessation was accompanied by Saudi decisions to blacklist an increasing number of people and entities allegedly affiliated with Hezbollah. But Saudi actions became particularly rancorous on January 1, 2016, when it executed 46 people accused of terrorism, a group that included Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr and three other Saudi Shia. The most violent responses to those executions occurred in Iran when the Saudi embassy in Tehran and its consulate in Mashhad were sacked later that day. During an Arab League summit convened in Cairo on January 10 to address the situation, a resolution was passed condemning Iran's failure to prevent the attacks and its “three decades of destabilizing activities.”¹⁶ Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, who heads the Free Patriotic Movement and is the son-in-law of General Michel Aoun (Hezbollah's candidate to

become the next president of the republic), chose not to accept the resolution, which also condemned Iran's intervention in a number of Arab countries but made no specific mention of Hezbollah.^{17,18}

Of course, those actions spawned countless debates in Lebanon, most of which were exceptionally mundane. Ultimately, the outcomes of those exchanges demonstrated simply that none of the Lebanese actors, including those considered friends of Saudi Arabia, was willing to take any stand that might contradict Hezbollah's opinion on the situation. Several weeks later (during which time Saudi Arabia continued to query its Lebanese friends), the official Saudi news agency announced on February 19 that according to an informed source, the kingdom had decided to suspend its \$3 + \$1 billion aid packages for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the country's security forces. Then, on February 23, Saudi Arabia followed its previous action by announcing travel warnings advising Saudi citizens to avoid Lebanon (even though “no discernible shift” had affected the Lebanese security situation).¹⁹ This time, the Saudi “drive” peaked when the Gulf

¹⁵ <http://www.arabsat.com/english/about>

¹⁶ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/arab-league-statement-backs-saudi-arab-in-diplomatic-fight-with-iran-1452457521>

¹⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/20/world/middleeast/saudis-cut-off-funding-for-military-aid-to-lebanon.html>

¹⁸ *Al-Hayat*, January 11, 2016.

¹⁹ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/03/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-cuts-billions-in-aid-to-lebanon-opening-door-for-iran.html?_r=2

Cooperation Council (GCC), a summit of Arab Interior Ministers held in Tunis (both held on March 2) and the Arab League (March 11) all announced resolutions labeling Hezbollah a terrorist organization.²⁰ Before (and since) that characterization was made, a number of other measures have been instituted. These include closing the Lebanese branches of the Saudi al-Ahli (National Commerce) bank, successive expulsions of groups of expatriate Lebanese from Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries (*contract termination in official parlance*), blacklisting Lebanese companies (considered as well by the U.S. government as “Hezbollah procurement agents”) and closing the offices of Saudi television stations *al-Arabiyya* and *al-Hadath*.^{21,22,23}

Interestingly, responses to these measures among Saudi Arabia's Lebanese clients were predictably noncommittal. *After* the GCC resolution that condemned Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, Saad Hariri declared that the Future-Hezbollah dialogue would continue.²⁴ Further, while

Nohad Machnouk urged the suspension of that dialogue in February and criticized Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil's refusal to sign the January Arab League resolution, he also chose not to sign the March 2 resolution enacted by the Interior Ministers to condemn Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.²⁵

In all likelihood (and according to “authorized” Saudi leaks), more measures are to be expected as long as the current balance of power remains unchanged. Although Hezbollah is aware of the popular narrative which holds that the recent Saudi measures were introduced to convey its displeasure with Hezbollah's rhetoric and other expressions of “Lebanese” animosity, the responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of Lebanese officials to mitigate Saudi/GCC anger by molding it into something that is at once “human” and banal. After all, the Lebanese certainly do not need more bad news. In the absence of such engagement, however, Saudi Arabia and its allies will continue to “help” the Lebanese people

²⁰ For GCC resolution: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/gulf-cooperation-council-labels-hezbollah-a-terrorist-group-1456926654>, for Tunis resolution (from which the Lebanese, Iraqi, Algerian and Tunisian delegations abstained): <http://en.annahar.com/article/327923-saudi-foreign-minister-says-kingdom-not-seeking-to-undermine-lebanese-cabinet-for-arab-league-resolution-from-which-the-lebanese-and-iraqi-delegations-abstained>: <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2016/03/11/world/middleeast/ap-ml-arabs-hezbollah.html>.

²¹ <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/202347>

²² <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/203120-nearly-90-lebanese-fired-from-their-jobs-in-saudi-arabia>

²³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-saudi-lebanon-idUSKCN0VZIC2>

²⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/video/world/middleeast/100000004246223/ex-premier-of-lebanon-on-hezbollah.html?action-click>type=vhs&version=vhs-heading&module=vhs®ion=title-area>

²⁵ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Mar-02/340232-lebanon-interior-minister-rejects-tunis-arab-summit-statement-classifying-hezbollah-as-terrorist.ashx>

understand that the situation is not as simple as the explanations being offered to them by their politicians. At any rate, it is as difficult to explain this *shift* in Saudi Arabia's policy as it is to clarify any other feature of that nation's Lebanon-oriented foreign

policy. Clearly, however, this policy shift is linked more to developments within the region (primarily in Syria and Iraq) than it is to Lebanon per se. Moreover, it derives much more from the general state of confrontation with Iran than it does with Hezbollah.

Best to Avoid Figures...

On February 23, 2016, Saudi-based Lebanese Shia businessman Rabih el-Amine—who is also executive secretary of the “Lebanese Business Council” in Saudi Arabia—informed the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat* that the 500,000 Lebanese working in the kingdom would be reduced to 400,000 in 2016 “without expulsions...due to a decline in the job opportunity market.” During the preparation of this Alert, Hayya Bina asked el-Amine for an update on the information he shared with *al-Hayat*:



Rabih el-Amine

Without doubt, many of those currently working in the Gulf countries will lose their jobs because of the current economic crisis. Unfortunately, the effects of this situation will be felt more by the Lebanese because their chances for getting new jobs are reduced by the political crisis.... I don't want to give any predictions about the figures involved, but if we consider *Saudi Oger*, for instance, a company that alone employs 30,000 Lebanese, we can get a better idea [of the magnitude of this looming] catastrophe! The construction sector is not the only one that will suffer.... The advertising sector is also under a lot of pressure. I really prefer not to give any figures....



Following the March/April 2015 media confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah, the Lebanese Business Council launched a media campaign that was highly apologetic to Saudi Arabia under the slogan: “Thanks [Saudi Arabia]... Sorry [Saudi Arabia]... Enough [defamation of Saudi Arabia]....” Interestingly, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt arranged a meeting between a delegation from the Council and MP Mohammad Raad, the head of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc. During that meeting, Raad promised his visitors that Hezbollah would consider toning down its propaganda abuse of Saudi Arabia (*al-Hayat*, May 2, 2015)!

At left, MP Mohammad Raad, surrounded by delegation members of the Lebanese Business Council. To the right, the campaign's poster which reads: “Thanks [Saudi Arabia]... Sorry [Saudi Arabia]... Enough [defamation of Saudi Arabia]....”.

In some regards, this dramatic shift may also be intended for the U.S., since that country's "concern" for Lebanon extends only to ensuring that it hears as little as possible about the the Lebanese State. Considering the foregoing, the reason behind Lebanon's quasi-neutralization via the "non obstat" registered by the Saudis and Iranians to the 2014 formation of the country's "national interest" government becomes even clearer. Accordingly, the following and particularly urgent question must be asked: Are the measures Saudi Arabia has been taking against Lebanon sufficient to change its status as a "war-free zone" and propel the country into the larger, regional theater of operations, most notably the one that still exists in Syria?²⁶



Understandably, concerns have indeed been raised about the potentially destabilizing effects of measures such as those noted above. Thus far, however, of those actions, the one that offers the greatest risk is the economic reality of the sudden absence of remittances brought in by the half-million Lebanese expats working in the Gulf, a sum that in 2015 totaled \$7.5 billion and represented 15% of Lebanon's GDP.²⁷ Certainly, therefore, if the GCC were to

expel a significant number of those workers, the impact on Lebanon's economy would be grave. Moreover, as the Gulf States have contributed consistently to the Lebanese economy, such as through tourism and banking, the new measures (e.g., targeted travel advisories and discouraging investment in Lebanon by the Gulf States) would indeed affect these areas negatively. Nevertheless, since neither of those Lebanese industries is exclusively reliant on the Gulf States, their complete collapse would be unlikely.²⁸ Yet, while the economic risk associated with the draconian measures being instituted against expatriate Lebanese workers by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries cannot easily be ignored, the decisions being made to implement those actions exemplify confrontational politics. Since the decision has already been made to impose a reduction in the number of Lebanese working outside the country, the real issues at hand are the pace and intensity of that reduction.

While the timing of these measures remains an issue of rampant speculation, the clearest and most important message sent by Saudi Arabia regarding the situation in Lebanon relates to the country's army and other security agencies.

²⁶ Of note, Saudi Arabia threatened in February 2016 to intervene directly in Syria.

²⁷ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/lebanon-gcc-decision-banking-sector.html>

²⁸ Cf., notes 20, 21 and 22

Regardless of discussions about how Saudi Arabia's cancellation of its \$3 + \$1 billion in aid might affect the operational capabilities of the LAF and other security agencies, the consequences of the measures noted above are not restricted to Lebanon's economy or military.²⁹ Rather, they also have political consequences that certainly extend beyond Lebanon and Hezbollah and call into question some of the basic principles that have guided most conservative approaches taken to Lebanon in the last several years. On March 9, for example, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir explained that Hezbollah is exerting undue influence over Lebanese State institutions and the army.³⁰ General Ahmad Assiri, counselor to the Saudi minister of defense and the spokesperson for *Operation Decisive Storm* stated during a press conference in Paris that the arms intended originally for the LAF via Saudi aid would probably have fallen into the hands of Hezbollah. By

omission, therefore, he labeled the LAF “weak” compared to Hezbollah and offered a reminder that one provision of UNSCR 1701 stipulated Hezbollah's functional disarmament. Yet the position Assiri advocated contrasted directly with the U.S. approach to Lebanon, a major pillar of which is maintaining Lebanese “stability” and supporting the LAF. According to reliable American sources, senior U.S. officials including John Kerry (privately) and State Department spokesman John Kirby (publicly) have expressed concerns over Saudi Arabia's cancellation of military aid.³¹ Specifically, Kirby noted that the U.S. preferred not to “leave the field open to Hezbollah or its patrons.”³²

The U.S. desire to militate against this Saudi perception and suppress questions regarding the competency and capability of the LAF became evident soon after those statements were made. For instance, during a March 31 ceremony in Beirut to deliver three Huey II helicopters to the LAF,

²⁹ While it might be argued that had the aid materialized, it would indeed have boosted the capabilities of the “hopelessly under-armed” security forces tasked with fending off numerous threats to Lebanon's security, which include fighting a major battle against Islamist militias in August 2014 and the constant threat of bombings. Yet the military significance of Saudi Arabia's cancellation has also been downplayed. For instance, an LAF official emphasized that very little of the aid had actually been delivered, and David Schenker (of the Washington Institute) disputed the usefulness of the items promised and claimed that some Lebanese politicians were “quietly applauding the outcome as a boon for the LAF.”

For further information, see:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-turns-on-lebanon-for-its-unfaithfulness-and-lack-of-gratitude-after-decades-of-largesse-a6907961.html>

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/20/world/middleeast/saudis-cut-off-funding-for-military-aid-to-lebanon.html?_r=0

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabia-rethinks-its-commitments-to-lebanon>

³⁰ <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Mar-09/341400-lebanese-army-under-hezbollahs-influence-saudi-fm.ashx>

³¹ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-presses-saudi-arabia-not-to-further-punish-lebanon-economically-1457434983>

³² <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-lebanon-usa-idUSKCN0WA2MZ>

U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Richard Jones announced:

...the Lebanese-American security relationship has never been stronger than it is today [and that] the United States has absolute confidence in the army's commitment, determination, and capacity to defend Lebanon and defend the Lebanese people against terrorist threats. This is why the American people are providing you with the weapons and munitions that you have requested, on an expedited basis.³³

That same day "British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond announced a further \$22 million for border guard training through to 2019 and \$6.5 million for general training of 5,000 Lebanese troops."³⁴ Unsurprisingly, the LAF tends to adopt an increasing number of "Americanisms" within its organization because of U.S. generosity, and on February 3, 2016, the day General Kahwaji arrived in Washington, the LAF launched an operation near Orsal that included apprehending six suspected terrorists. Thus, it seems fair to conclude that the LAF's operations may have been undertaken to demonstrate alignment with U.S.

goals. Coincidentally, the LAF staged a similar operation the day Jubeir denounced the LAF as being under Hezbollah's influence.

If, as Riad Kahwaji notes, it is true that anti-Hezbollah parties in Lebanon have ties not only with Saudi Arabia, but also with countries like the U.S. and France (the interests of which with regard to constraining Hezbollah are tempered by their desire to preserve stability in Lebanon by, for example, preventing further infiltration by groups such as ISIL (Daesh), the elimination of which has emerged as an overriding priority in those countries), then it is also true from a broader perspective that those same Lebanese are essentially being shunted aside by the "game of nations."³⁵ Further, it is quite likely that they will have very little say in the struggle over Lebanon and the LAF (with specific regard to its status and role). Importantly, considering the political anemia that exists today in Lebanon, that struggle will certainly become more robust in the future.

Several observers and commentators have suggested that a gradual Saudi withdrawal from Lebanon will lead to greater influence by Hezbollah/Iran over

³³ <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/205950>

³⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-military-aid-idUSKCN0WXIHY>

³⁵ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/lebanon-hezbollah-speech-saudi-arabia-gcc-terrorist.html#ixzz42xlHlg3U>

Lebanon and its institutions, and that may indeed be correct if we assume that Saudi Arabia and Iran have been competing for control over Lebanon—a circumstance that definitely seems questionable. From the perspective held today by those holding the reins of power in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon has been "reclassified" as Iran's eastern Mediterranean "headquarters" from which that country coordinates some of its regional operations. In that sense, it seems illogical that Saudi Arabia would continue funding and otherwise enabling the stability of this "enemy" facility. Of course, the Saudi establishment is aware that some collateral damage may follow its revised policy toward Lebanon and that some of its friends in Lebanon will become victims of "friendly fire." But whatever the losses, they count very little where the broader picture is concerned. As one observer of Saudi politics described during a chat with ShiaWatch:

King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz passed away on January 23, 2015. Since then, deep changes have affected Saudi policies at home and abroad. What Lebanon is going through is in a way a liquidation of King Abdullah's Lebanese legacy in political and financial terms.

Assuming the veracity of the foregoing analysis—and thus far all of our indicators concur—then

it should become apparent that Saudi Arabia is breaking its own taboos where Lebanon is concerned, and that this divergence will ultimately introduce any number of other "surprises." Obviously, with respect to Lebanon, the overriding question remains: Aside from all the other pressures the country is experiencing (e.g., the cost imposed by the Syrian refugee crisis (financial as well as social and political) and the accelerating

An April Fool?



On April 1, *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, the pan-Arab daily newspaper owned primarily by Saudi King Salman and others close to his nuclear family published the cartoon that appears above. Amidst a representation of the Lebanese flag, the words on the cedar are "the State of Lebanon." Above and to the right of the cedar is written, "April fools..." Understandably, that caricature attracted a substantial amount of attention. Aside from Lebanese condemnations of the flag's defacement, a small-scale attack on the Beirut offices of *ash-Sharq al-Awsat* and the halfhearted apology/clarification that was buried in the newspaper, this caricature conveys words that are typically proscribed when diplomacy is involved.

decay of its political system and basic institutions), just how long can Lebanon withstand these Saudi *surprises*?

While it is relatively easy to predict the worst where security is concerned, such as the country's virtual implosion, other scenarios should also be considered. One such scenario (and not the least likely) is that Lebanon's political agony will persist. Should that happen, the consequences would include a tighter objective alliance—regardless of political and ideological differences—between the military, security, financial and sectarian centers of power

and those who control them, regardless of whether they are affiliated with the State or exist as private, non-state entities. In fact, that alliance has already emerged and is hard at work. Laboring in harmony, these power centers are autonomously expanding their roles and "responsibilities," justifying their actions by capitalizing on the unassailable need to *protect the country and preserve its stability*. Simultaneously, however, those centers of power are greedily consuming, through "legal" and clearly illegal means, all that remains of Lebanon's meager resources.