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## **Palestinian Reconciliation Sponsored by Hamas's “Three Musketeers”**

### 3+1: The Reconciliation Architects

The current course of events that led to the agreement dates back to January 2017, when a delegation of three senior Hamas members arrived in Cairo and placed a memorandum of understandings, including a road map, on the desk of Khaled Fawzi, the head of Egyptian Intelligence. It was a detailed strategic plan for Gaza reconstruction, including three different graduated arrangements: a settlement between Hamas and Egypt; an (informal) agreement of understandings between Israel, Hamas, and Egypt; and reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah.

The three Hamas representatives, referred to as “the architects of the reconciliation” on social media or alternatively, “the three musketeers,” were Yahya Sinwar (head of Hamas in the Gaza Strip), Ruhi Mushtaha (holder of the Prisoners Portfolio in Hamas), and Tawfiq Abu Naim (head of Hamas-run security forces in Gaza). All three were released in the Shalit deal; were among the founders of the Hamas military wing Izz ad-Din al-Qassam; and were field leaders in the first intifada. Some five and a half years after their release in the Shalit deal, they managed to reach the top of the power pyramid in Gaza, and in February 2017, carried out a quiet “coup” that brought them to the peak of power over more senior figures in the organization .

A key player in addition to the Hamas leadership, a supporting actor, as it were, is Mohammed Dahlan. The discourse on social media reviled his close relations to Sinwar and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Dahlan grew up with Sinwar in the Khan Yunis refugee camp, until their paths diverged. Dahlan worked with the Egyptian President when el-Sisi was an officer in Egyptian Military Intelligence and Dahlan was in charge of Preventive Security in Gaza. Their friendship grew stronger when el-Sisi became President in June 2014. Over the last six months, due to the fierce enmity between Dahlan and PA President Abu Mazen, Dahlan moved his residence to Abu Dhabi. He has even been marked as a collaborator with Israel, to prepare for the day after Abu Mazen. In the past year he has been responsible for transferring money from the UAE for humanitarian aid and reconstruction in Gaza (including by means of his wife Jalila, who frequently visits the Strip).

The discourse suggests that Hamas leadership in Gaza has taken a long term strategic decision to work toward the reconstruction of both Gaza and the movement. For that reason, an understanding has emerged that Hamas must return to increased activity in the West Bank, in tandem with the elections there and reforms to the PLO. The resistance (muqawama) can wait until this stage is complete. In order to facilitate the reconstruction of Gaza and Hamas’s military power, the movement understands that it must adopt the Hezbollah model: separation of military control from civil governance. An essential step is the establishment of a civilian government to run the Gaza Strip and take responsibility for feeding and supporting some two million residents of Gaza, separate from the military force. Hamas will not lay down its arms, but will keep a low military profile inside the Strip, to make it easier for the international community to provide reconstruction aid .

Implementation of this plan requires above all the improvement of relations between Hamas and Egypt. Since the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government and the rise of el-Sisi, the movement has been banned in Egypt. Its offices in Cairo were closed, and it was regarded as

a terror organization - the Gaza arm of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the agreement, the “three musketeers,” who were not yet part of the official leadership, undertook: (a) to sever completely all relations with the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood ; (b) to cut off all contact with the Sinai branch of the Islamic State (ISIS) completely, while submitting the names of activists, and its media arm and logistics members to Egyptian intelligence, and putting a complete stop to the movement of fighters and weapons between Gaza and Sinai; (c) to arrest Islamic Jihad activists and members in Gaza; and (d) to disengage completely from the political arm of Hamas, which is located in Qatar .

In order to enable fulfillment of the commitment to Egypt, Sinwar, Mushtaha, and Abu Naim got the green light to take control of the movement in the Strip. In February 2017 Sinwar took over the Hamas leadership, and Ismail Haniyeh replaced Khaled Mashal in the leadership of the political wing. About a month later the movement published a political document, in which it announced, inter alia, its separation from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The other parts of the agreement were also fulfilled, and action was taken against the Sinai District and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, including the banning of the latter’s political leadership, headed by Dr. Ramadan Salah, and his deputy Ziad Nakhleh .

At the same time, Hamas set up a kind of “shadow government,” comprising seven ministers, headed by Ismail Haniyeh. Its job was to respond to the basic needs of Gaza residents, after a long period in which the Palestinian Authority cut budgets, salary payments, and fuel supplies. This step angered Abu Mazen, who in late April 2017 decided to put heavier pressure on the Strip, and increased the sanctions with the hope that this would arouse public opposition to Hamas in Gaza and lead to the dismantling of the governance committee. According to the discourse in the West Bank, Fatah gave Hamas a number of conditions for removal of the sanctions: (a) dismantlement of the “shadow government”; (b) the return of Rami Hamdallah’s elected government to the Strip; and (c) scheduling of elections.

Once all the initial confidence building measures between Hamas and Egypt were complete, the next step that Egypt and Hamas agreed to was to open the Rafah border crossing, in return for the return of the PA’s security mechanisms to Gaza and the stationing of members of Abu Mazen’s Presidential Guard at the crossings. In September 2017, while Abu Mazen was on his way to the UN General Assembly, Egypt announced understandings reached by way of an internal Palestinian reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah (largely based on understandings from the 2011 Third Cairo Agreement).

Hamas in fact accepted Fatah's three conditions, and on September 16 announced the disbanding of the committee to manage Gaza affairs, consent to the transfer of civilian powers to an agreed national government led by Hamdallah, and consent to the setting of a date for elections. Note that Hamas has never undertaken, either in any prior reconciliation agreements or in the present agreement, to dismantle its military wing, and it has also never undertaken to stop the resistance and recognize Israel .

The reconciliation agreement was signed on October 10. At the time of this writing, members of the Presidential Guard were stationed at three crossings (Rafah, Kerem Shalom, and Erez). The second stage was supposed to take place on December 1 but was postponed. All government institutions in Gaza should have been handed over to the Hamdallah government. On the other hand, Abu Mazen has not yet lifted the sanctions on the Strip, notwithstanding his commitment to do so.

In conclusion, the assumptions listed above are divorced from reality. It is true that Egypt paved the way to the agreement, but it was not Egypt that pushed for it to be signed. Later, it was not Abu Mazen's sanctions that pushed Hamas to accept the reconciliation agreement, which from the start was not intended to bring down the PA chairman. The sanctions also failed to rouse public protest against Hamas, as many expected. What brought about the whole move, from start to end, was a strategic decision by the new, strong Hamas troika in the Gaza Strip, who maneuvered their way to the agreement based on their general perception of how to achieve a long term improvement in Hamas's situation.

#### The Agreement's Chances of Success: A Zero-Sum Game? Is There an Alternative?

In spite of the broad public will and strong support for the reconciliation agreement, numerous doubts have arisen – in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip – regarding its chances of success. There are several reasons for this – the first concerns the poor relations between the Palestinian factions and past experience. In the thirty years since Hamas was established, Hamas and Fatah have managed to put their disagreements aside and cooperate only once: during the al-Aqsa Intifada. Meanwhile numerous failed agreements have been signed. The Mecca Agreement (2007), Yemen Agreement (2008), first Cairo Agreement (2009), Damascus Agreement (2010), second Cairo Agreement (2011), Doha Agreement (2012), third Cairo Agreement (2013), and Shati Agreement (2014) – all failed to be implemented.

The second reason refers to the division of responsibility in the Strip. Under the agreement, the PA accepts full civilian responsibility for the Gaza residents, with no military

accountability. In other words, for any violent actions by Hamas, the PA will suffer the outcomes, which might even be felt in the West Bank. This is a copy of the Lebanese model. If so, why would the PA be interested in this arrangement ?

Third, assuming that the first phase in the Strip is completed, there is a high probability that Hamas will gradually return to political activity in the West Bank. The chances of the PA and Israel supporting this are slim. This also applies to possible elections, with many West Bank residents arguing that neither Israel nor the PA will allow elections to take place with the participation of Hamas. That is why it is difficult to imagine implementation of the reconciliation agreement outside of Gaza .

At the same time, there are two interesting arguments that arise from the discussion and actually indicate strong prospects for success, at least regarding improvements in the situation in Gaza. One points to Sinwar's determination to reconstruct Gaza and Hamas and his long term outlook. Many Gazans claim that this is not a cynical move intended to cripple Abu Mazen and the reconciliation, but a decision by Sinwar to put the movement's political ambitions to one side, and give the Strip breathing space, by relieving the economic pressure and by restoring the orderly supply of electricity and water. As he sees it, his popularity will increase as the situation improves, even if the Palestinian Authority civilian government assumes center stage. According to the second argument, Sinwar has prepared a closing plan if the PA frustrates the reconciliation. Through coordination with Egypt and Israel's tacit consent, Mohammed Dahlan will be brought back to the Strip to head a temporary government, backed by Gulf funding and Egyptian support .

#### Gains versus Losses

The Gazans are eager for internal Palestinian reconciliation, and even prepared to forgive Egypt for its past behavior, including its cooperation with Israel to tighten the siege on Gaza. However, Gazans are also very wary, as they claim they have yet to experience the benefits of reconciliation. For the ordinary resident, the situation in Gaza today has not changed since the agreement was signed .

Egyptian discourse on social media points to several clear Egyptian gains from the mediation deal. At the political level, Egypt has managed to hurt its rivals at home and abroad. Hamas has agreed to cut off entirely its relations with the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, perhaps the most significant and precedent-setting step since Hamas was founded 30 years ago. Hamas has (apparently) also distanced itself from the patronage of Qatar and Turkey. The appointment of Salah al-Aruri as deputy head of the Hamas Political

Bureau with the departure of Khaled Mashal and the transfer of its military HQ to Beirut, instead of Qatar and Turkey, reinforces this line.

At the security level, Egypt gained from the Hamas separation from Wilayat Sinai (the local branch of the Islamic State). Hamas undertook to prevent Islamic State fighters from entering Gaza (previously Gaza provided logistical depth for the organization) and transfers of weapons between Gaza and Sinai. In addition, the Gaza Strip stopped providing a platform for the media wing of the Islamic State, and the names of its leaders were even given to Egypt's security and intelligence forces. In addition, there was a wave of arrests of Islamic Jihad activists and Gaza fighters who collaborated with Wilayat Sinai .

At the economic level, Gaza's center of gravity moved from Qatar and Turkey to the Emirates, Egypt's ally. This ended Gaza's economic dependence on Qatar, and Egypt's security mechanisms are the channel through which money is transferred to the Strip. El-Sisi's image also benefited. Presidential elections are due to take place in Egypt by May 2018, and after the stinging defeats in the war on terror in Sinai and the transfer of the two islands Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia, the President needs to show some success. Therefore, net users claim, he is fully committed to the deal and his role as mediator .

However, there are also voices expressing criticism of el-Sisi's policy on this matter. Some accuse the Egyptian regime of hypocrisy: it jailed some 40,000 members of the Muslim Brotherhood and declared it to be a terrorist organization, but in Gaza it formed an alliance with its Gaza branch – Hamas. Another complaint is that “no Palestinian reconciliation can wipe out the stain of Tiran and Sanafir.” In other words, the Egyptians understand that this is an attempt to improve the country's image, but not all are prepared to swallow the bait. The Egyptian President was not helped by photographs showing him smiling with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu at the UN General Assembly in New York, compared to the angry face shown to Abu Mazen at the same event. A large segment of the Egyptian public is not eager to adopt this siding with Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.

All parties see Israel as benefiting from the reconciliation. The expressions “two million hungry Palestinians” and “ticking bomb” recur in every discussion in Israel when the subject of Gaza is raised. For Israel, any arrangement in which Egypt – in collaboration with a Palestinian government led by Hamdallah – takes more responsibility for the civilian population and improving the quality of life in the Strip is welcome. More responsibility taken by the PA and Egypt is balanced against less Israeli responsibility. In addition, Israel gains a long term ceasefire (hudna) and quiet along the southern front at a sale price. All

Israel has to do in return for a long term ceasefire is to sit on the sidelines and not interfere with the progress on arrangements between Hamas and Egypt, and between Hamas and the PLO .

Since Hamas is directly committed to Egypt, and there is a genuine intention and will on both sides to keep the agreements between them, there are reasonable grounds to assume that under the current conditions, and if the agreement is implemented, the next round of violence between the IDF and Hamas has been postponed, even after taking into account increased tension following discovery of the tunnels (one belonging to Hamas, and one to Islamic Jihad) in Israeli territory, and the reaction to the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Calm along the southern front is essential for Israel, enabling it to turn its attention to the northern arena. The removal of Turkish and Qatari money and influence from Gaza and their replacement with funding from Abu Dhabi and Riyadh is also a net gain for Israel, with no price to pay.

### **Gulf Watch: From “The Night of the Long Knives” to “Saving Private Hariri”**

On November 4, 2017, two important events took place in Saudi Arabia that created a public buzz in the Kingdom itself, in Lebanon, and the Arab world as a whole. The first event, referred to as “The Night of the Long Knives” on social media, included an unprecedented wave of arrests of hundreds of senior Saudi figures, including key figures in the economy, the media, politics, and the religious establishment. It was all in the name of the fight against corruption, and formalized by a Royal Order establishing the Supreme Committee for the Fight against Corruption, headed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who was given the authority to interrogate suspects, arrest them, deny their exit from the country, and freeze their assets. The second event that day was the arrival of Prime Minister of Lebanon Saad al-Hariri in Riyadh and his announcement, broadcast directly on the Saudi channel al-Arabiya, of his resignation (which he withdrew on his return to Lebanon), in a letter in which he said there were threats to his life, and so he was unable to return to Lebanon.

As of the time of writing, these two affairs are not yet over. It is very hard to know the full story at this stage, or to know how events will unfold, so the following analysis will focus on the discussions of these matters on the social media, without recourse to interpretations that are not yet clear.

### **Purging the Kingdom**

At the basis of the discussion, it is essential to note the huge gap between reactions to the Crown Prince's actions in Saudi Arabia and the reactions in other Arab countries and the

West. Outside the Kingdom, terms like the big bang, storm, and escalation were used, but within Saudi Arabia the debate is highly consistent, with the vast majority of leaders of public opinion inside and outside of social media are supporting the young bin Salman, in both his foreign and domestic policy.

Bin Salman's latest moves, culminating on November 4, are extremely popular at home. The Saudi public mostly loves the Prince and agrees with him on the need for rapid and extreme changes. The reforms on the rights of women (permission to drive, opening of public events to women, and bringing musical performances to Saudi Arabia) on the one hand, and the arrest of senior clerics, corrupt tycoons, and journalists on the other – were welcomed. After he promised to invest the money confiscated from tycoons in the public, some even called him “Robin Hood of the Gulf”.

In the rest of the Arab world, reactions were more varied. Some younger voices were very happy with bin Salman's moves against corruption, and regret that there were no similar actions in their own countries. Those who didn't like the moves explained this in two ways: (a) everyone in Saudi Arabia is corrupt, irrespective of the purges. There are about 7,000 princes and princesses, and all are fundamentally corrupt. In this context, there was mention of the yacht recently purchased by the Crown Prince for about half a billion dollars; (b) it is doubtful whether bin Salman is a genuine reformist, or just a tyrant trying to consolidate his power by arresting all his opponents, as Saddam Hussein did in 1979, when he was supported by the West only because he stood up against the ayatollah regime in Iran.

An interesting perspective is reflected by Saudi journalists and intellectuals living in the West. They discuss three striking characteristics of bin Salman's conduct in his interior and foreign policies. The first is his unwillingness to accept criticism of his policy. Evidence of this is the fact that he has not yet granted full journalistic freedom to express views that contradict the government's main line. The second characteristic is rapid pace of change and the opening of far too many fronts simultaneously, both inside and outside Saudi Arabia. The third characteristic is a perceived error in his foreign policy: it is unnecessarily severe toward Qatar and political Islam, while open toward Israel and ignoring the Palestinian issue .

An important question is whether there is opposition to the Crown Prince at home, and whether it is strong enough to challenge him. Many Saudi exiles believe that there are at present three entities with the ability (if not the intention) to oppose him: (a) the army, which according to assessments supports bin Salman, partly because his public popularity is so great, so the probability of implementing this option is believed to be low; (b) the clerics, who



are harshly repressed by bin Salman, as he proceeds with his policy of openness and reforms that are not supported by them. The interest is there, but it is argued that if they try to organize, the army will probably intervene, as happened in Egypt, and neutralize them; (c) members of the Royal family (Abdullah's sons, Naif and Sultan) who have been humiliated, dismissed, and placed under house arrest, and there is a strong possibility that when they recover, they will try to eliminate him. They are the only ones who have nothing to lose – both their status and their honor have been taken away (unlike the army and the clerics .( When weighing the voices on social media, in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world in general, the picture is of a young, popular leader who has managed in less than three years (since his father was crowned King) to consolidate his power and respond to public demands, with the emphasis on his own generation. He has full support at home for his policies (whether or not they succeed). More critical assessments of the Prince's hastiness and arrogance are only expressed outside the Kingdom. All the indications are that Saudi Arabia is not suffering from chaos or instability. On the contrary, that is only a Western misperception of recent events.

#### A Country Hostage to Iran, a Prime Minister Hostage to Saudi Arabia

The social media response to the resignation of al-Hariri can be viewed in three dimensions: along the timeline, where the division is between immediate responses (in the first 48 hours) and later reactions; the inter-Arab dimension, which ranges from discussion within Lebanon to the views of the Sunni public outside Lebanon; and the response of Hezbollah, consisting of messages to the international community, Israel, and the Lebanese public .

In the Arab world, the general reaction was mockery of Lebanon, which was described as “a prisoner of Iran while its prime minister is a prisoner of Saudi Arabia.” Apart from that, there were instances of betting and polls on Twitter, where users were asked to state whether they thought Hariri had been kidnapped, had resigned, been fired, or was a voluntary prisoner. social media was buzzing, and at a certain stage the debate around the affair seemed to be more important than the actual outcome.

The Gulf states saw expressions of gloating and absolute support for the Crown Prince and his policy. The “Hariri kidnapping” was not seen as problematic, since all means of repelling Iranian hegemony and interference in Arab internal affairs were legitimate. There were calls such as “we won't agree to be Hezbollah's fig leaf in Lebanon any longer.” Others said: “It's important to avoid civil war in Lebanon, but the national security of Saudi Arabia is more important to us. Some encouraged the Crown Prince to take even harsher steps, and impose economic sanctions on Lebanon, even at the cost of harming the Sunni sect. To these were added other voices from the Arab world, mainly Egypt, urging Israel to continue the Saudi

line and attack Hezbollah in order to complete the action and defeat the organization, even at the risk of endangering the lives of Lebanese civilians.

One message was very clear, namely, that citizens of the Gulf states, who had not been affected by the regional upheaval (“the Arab Spring”) were not afraid of instability. Their hatred of Iran is greater than the price they may have to pay for the policies of the Saudi Crown Prince. The Prince’s ambition and energetic activity have charmed not only Thomas Friedman, who interviewed him, but also many Saudis who support this approach and are sure that “the good guys” are about to defeat “the bad guys” (Iran and its allies). In other Arab countries people were not so quick to attack Iran and Lebanon, largely because of the real fear of an aggressive Iranian response .

In the background, nobody in the Gulf was surprised by news items about a military intelligence alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, there was hardly any domestic criticism on this matter. Saudis responded to the external attacks, which started after Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot gave an interview to the Saudi paper Elaph (published in London), by saying that the alliance was purely intended for the war against Iran, and did not mean normalization with Israel. On the other hand, at present Saudi Arabia must above all preserve national security, even at the price of cooperating with Israel. Between the lines, the message is that the Palestinian issue has not been forgotten, but has been set aside temporarily.

#### “Saving Private Hariri”

The first reaction in Lebanon to the events was shock. The element of surprise worked, and the initial alarm of all players in Lebanon was genuine. The majority were convinced that Hariri had been kidnapped and was being held hostage in Riyadh. A widespread assumption at this stage was that the next step would be an Israeli attack on Hezbollah. The Lebanese felt that they were between a rock and a hard place; as one activist put it: “If we attack Hezbollah, we’ll suffer the force of their response. If we ignore Saudi Arabia, we’ll suffer diplomatic and economic sanctions, and perhaps even a military attack”.

The Sunni leadership in Lebanon chose to present a united front to the Sunni public, giving full backing to Hariri’s decision to resign. Senior figures attacked Hezbollah, saying that the time had come for it to pay for its policies. Naturally, there was no shortage of cynical voices, who accused senior Sunni figures Nouhad Machnouk (Minister of the Interior) and Ashraf Rifi (head of Interior Defense Mechanisms 2005-2013) of weaving a plot to be appointed in place of Hariri .

Some emphasized the fact that Hariri's resignation was a humiliation for Lebanon, and they could not understand why the Saudis decided to act in a way that was reminiscent of how the Syrians behaved when they controlled the country. Why, they wondered, are the Lebanese subjected to collective punishment and "thrown under the bus," even though many of them objected to Hezbollah policy? A Lebanese Christian activist expressed his anger towards the Saudis: "The political culture in Lebanon is one in which leaders are elected and not appointed from above and received with cheers and applause. We're not a flock of sheep or a piece of property that can be handed from one owner to another".

For their part, Hezbollah supporters did not hesitate to attack Hariri as Saudi Arabia's puppet. Amal Saad, a professor at Beirut University and supporter of Hezbollah, posted on Facebook: "For the record, the Hariri resignation isn't a sign of an imminent Israeli strike on Hezbollah in Lebanon but a substitute for it. The desire to destabilize Lebanon and prevent Hezbollah from participating in any government is a sign of a political bankruptcy and desperation. An actual American/Israeli plan to invade Lebanon would obviate the need for such disparate histrionics as Hariri's 'I have this sixth sense that Iran and Hezbollah are going to assassinate me.' The real story is that ISIS is finished and Saudi Arabia is throwing a tantrum".

A few days later, after some desperate Saudi attempts to communicate business as usual (publishing photos of Hariri and a TV interview with him), war with Israel had not broken out, and the situation calmed down in Lebanon. The hysteria was replaced with sarcasm toward Saudi Arabia, whose conduct in the affair was perceived as ridiculous, harmful, and ineffective toward Iran and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah handled the affair in diverse ways, operating in three different "propaganda" fronts. For its domestic audience, Hezbollah's main message was that Hariri had been kidnapped and was held hostage, and until he was returned to Lebanon there was no point discussing political issues in Lebanon and no negotiations would start until then. "We won't let them blackmail us," was the main narrative taken. That was also the message to the international community, whether to France that was mediating or the United States that was watching events carefully. Hezbollah tried to present the kidnapping of heads of state as an illegitimate negotiating tactic, so the international community must first ensure that the Lebanese Prime Minister was returned to his country, as a precondition for any demands.

Regarding Israel, Hezbollah adopted a different tone. An effort was made to lower the flames, with a message that Israel does not start wars for others and serves only its own interests.

Moreover, Hezbollah hinted that it had intelligence indicating that Saudi Arabia had tried to “buy” Israel, offering it a great deal of money to destroy Hezbollah. In other words, Hezbollah was trying to tell Israel that it had no grounds for going to war: “Saudi Arabia is trying to bribe you with money, but don’t take it”.

As for official Lebanon, President Michel Aoun gave a tearful interview on television, announcing that Lebanon could not accept the unlawful resignation of its “son” Hariri. He would have to return to Lebanon and submit his resignation in person, and now all Lebanese efforts were focused on returning the “kidnapped son.” The Shiite camp and large sections of the Christian community supported Hezbollah and Aoun in their demand for the return of Hariri. The Sunni camp remained largely cynical – toward the Saudis, but also towards Aoun’s “crocodile tears.” Activist Sara Assaf tweeted the President: “No, Saad al-Hariri is not your son. He is the son of Rafik al-Hariri, who was murdered by your ally Hezbollah on February 14, 2005, when you were in exile due to your opposition to the Syrian regime, which has now also become your ally”.

After two weeks in Riyadh and Paris, Hariri returned to Lebanon. Debate in the country changed after his return. Apart from continuing mockery of failed Saudi foreign policy all over the Middle East, the popularity of Hezbollah and Aoun increased. For many sections of the public, they had behaved in a mature, responsible way, managed to bring Hariri back to Lebanon, apparently prevented the breakup of the government, and blocked the possibility of violence – whether civil war or an (imaginary) Israeli attack on Lebanon. The general mood on social media was that the alliance between the Christians and the Shiites, including between Aoun and Nasrallah, was stronger than ever, and that was what had saved Lebanon.

The broader context is important. Parliamentary elections are due to be held in May 2018, for the first time in nine years. Some claim that Hezbollah wants to buy time, so it will not institute dramatic moves in the next few months. At the same time, it will probably seek a Sunni politician who will reach an understanding with it and who can replace Hariri, in order to restrict Saudi political influence in Lebanon. This will lend the semblance of democratic elections without direct interference by Hezbollah. Meanwhile, Hezbollah, according to reports, in return for the return of Hariri to his post, has undertaken to cut back its involvement in conflicts in Yemen and Iraq, and to a certain extent, in Syria.

In conclusion, the public discourse shows that Hezbollah has emerged from the crisis as the savior of Lebanon from Saudi aggression and escalation with regard to Israel, while Saudi

Arabia risked both regional and internal stability, and was humiliated in front of its adversaries.