

The Crisis in Lebanese-Saudi Relations: Yet Another Blow to the Cedar State

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The acute political crisis between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, joined by Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, is more bad news for the collapsing Lebanese state. Saudi Arabia initiated the crisis following a statement by the Lebanese Minister of Information, who is from the Hezbollah camp, opposing its war against the Houthis in Yemen, and Riyadh seems to have used this as an excuse to take action against Hezbollah and the new Lebanese government, which it controls. Saudi Arabia's full disengagement from Lebanon, if the crisis is not resolved, will severely damage the collapsing Lebanese economy, completely paralyze government activity, and perhaps even lead to its disintegration, thereby strengthening Hezbollah and pushing Lebanon further into Iran's arms. These developments are contrary to the interests of Israel and Western countries. Therefore, it is important that Western countries, especially the United States and France, intervene with the Gulf states to help resolve the crisis and initiate a joint effort that will harm Hezbollah, but without harming Lebanon and Hezbollah's domestic opponents.

Saudi Arabia severed its ties with Lebanon following the criticism of the Saudi war on the Houthis in Yemen voiced by George Kordahi, the Lebanese Minister of Information. Kordahi's remarks were made in an interview recorded with him in August, before he was appointed minister in mid-September, and made public on October 25, 2021. Kordahi, a Maronite Christian, is a member of the new government led by Najib Mikati that was formed about two months ago, after a delay of over a year since the dissolution of Lebanon's previous government following the explosion at the Beirut port (August 2020). He represents Frangieh's small Christian party, al-Marada, which is part of the March 8 camp comprising Hezbollah, Amal, and the large Christian Free Patriotic Movement. Born in 1950, he is a veteran journalist and media professional, and is well known in the Arab world.

In response, Riyadh and its Gulf partners – Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates – instructed their ambassadors on October 29-30 to

leave Beirut, and asked the Lebanese emissaries in their countries to return home. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have instructed their citizens not to visit Lebanon, and Kuwait has frozen visa requirements for Lebanese. Riyadh has even announced the total cessation of trade with Lebanon. Although Qatar and Oman showed solidarity with the Saudi move, they were content with “mere” messages of condemnation.

Lebanon is deeply concerned about the economic and political consequences of the crisis with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, which threatens the survival of the new government and could once again lead to prolonged paralysis of the political system and the inability to take the necessary decisions to improve the situation in Lebanon. This is another severe blow to Lebanon's collapsing economy, whose deficit has reached a quarter of GDP. On the eve of the start of the economic crisis in Lebanon in 2019, Saudi Arabia was Lebanon's fourth largest trading partner and a major customer of Lebanese agricultural products. Lebanese export to Saudi Arabia gradually shrunk to about \$280 million in 2019 and about \$200 million in 2020. Beyond that, the Gulf states are expected to continue to refrain from transferring aid promised to Lebanon (at the 2018 Donors Conference in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia pledged \$1 billion out of a total of \$11 billion pledged by all participants). A more serious move may be a future decision to prevent the transfer of funds of about half a million Lebanese working in the Gulf states, which are estimated at \$3-5 billion a year – 60 percent of all transfers to Lebanon.

The Lebanese president and prime minister have so far failed to advance a solution to the crisis. Prime Minister Mikati has adopted a cautious approach toward Kordahi and his patrons. In press interviews and in a speech on November 4, he called on the minister to put Lebanon's interests at the forefront, but did not explicitly demand his dismissal. This approach is understandable in light of Kordahi's refusal to resign on the grounds that his remarks were made before he was appointed minister, and because he enjoys the backing of his party leader and especially

Hezbollah. The organization was quick to prevent the dismissal of the minister, and threatened that if he is fired, two Hezbollah ministers would also resign. Hezbollah has also rejected an offer from the Arab League to mediate. Mikati took advantage of his time in Glasgow at the Climate Conference to raise the issue with other leaders, and sought the assistance of the United States (Secretary of State Anthony Blinken), France, (President Emmanuel Macron), Qatar, and Egypt. In an unusual statement on November 3, the Lebanese foreign minister called on Saudi Arabia and Iran to include the issue of Hezbollah in the dialogue between them, claiming that the organization has become a "regional problem" that Lebanon cannot solve on its own.

Kordahi's statement that provoked much outrage in Riyadh was in fact the straw that broke the Saudi camel's back, in the face of Hezbollah's maneuvers. Beyond Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen, Riyadh is also troubled by Hezbollah's strengthening in the Lebanese system, as it opens the door to Iran, which in turn is taking advantage of the difficult circumstances in Lebanon to deepen its grip on it. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan explicitly referred to this, claiming that the cause of the crisis lay "in the dominance of an Iranian agent in the arena," i.e., Hezbollah, which worries Saudi Arabia and neutralizes efforts by Riyadh and the Gulf states vis-à-vis Lebanon. In Saudi eyes, the new government in Lebanon is captive to Hezbollah and run by it. This understanding reflects reality: about two weeks before the Kordahi affair exploded, the Lebanese government did not convene due to fears of its disintegration in the face of Hezbollah's demand to oust the judge investigating the port explosion, which led to a violent clash on Beirut streets (October 14).

The backdrop to the current crisis is the continued decline in support for Lebanon from Saudi Arabia and the pragmatic Gulf states. This follows Hezbollah's strengthened position in Lebanon, as in their view, the organization currently runs the country for the benefit of its own interests. For many years Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states were the main contributors to Lebanon and those that assisted in its reconstruction, both after the long civil war (1975-1990) and after the Second Lebanon

War (2006). The deterioration in Saudi-Lebanese relations began with the appointment of Lebanese President Michel Aoun (2016), which marked the rise of Hezbollah's political power, as the organization was a partner in the deal that enabled this appointment. This development also contributed to Saudi Arabia's decision to recant on its willingness to finance a multi-billion dollar deal to sell arms from France to the Lebanese army, out of fear that the weapons would reach Hezbollah and contribute to its military strengthening. The failed Saudi move in 2017 against then-Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who was forced to resign during a visit to Riyadh, also stemmed from a Saudi understanding that Hariri collaborated with Hezbollah.

The recent Saudi moves against Lebanon are part of Saudi Arabia's extensive campaign against Hezbollah, including a declaration that Hezbollah's financial organization al-Qard al-Hasan is a terrorist organization. In the regional context, the Saudis are particularly angry about the assistance it has provided to Houthis in Yemen since the outbreak of the crisis there in 2015. In the past year this was joined by harsh allegations by Riyadh that Hezbollah is responsible for smuggling drugs into the kingdom and flooding it with captagon pills. Following the seizure last April of 5.3 million captagon pills planted in pomegranates imported from Lebanon, Riyadh decided to stop importing agricultural produce from Lebanon for a while.

At the same time, the timing of the sharp Saudi move against Lebanon raises questions in face of the renewed dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran on regional issues. It is possible that it is another expression of the lack of real progress in talks with Iran, and perhaps also a means to pressure Tehran. Unlike previous Saudi moves against Lebanon in recent years, this time Riyadh coordinated the severance of relations with Beirut with its partners in the Gulf. This can also be seen as an attempt by Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammad bin Salman to rehabilitate Saudi Arabia's regional status, which has weakened in recent years, as well as his personal status at home. It is also interesting to note the support for the Saudi move by the United Arab Emirates, after the friction that has

existed between the countries in recent years, and the addition of Kuwait, which generally prefers to sit on the fence and fulfill the role of mediator.

To Hezbollah, moving away from the pragmatic Gulf states serves its interests in the regional arena and within Lebanon, so it is determined not to fire Kordahi and to ensure that he maintain his leading position in the current government. In any case, even if Kordahi eventually agrees to resign, it is highly doubtful that this will completely resolve the crisis. Saudi Arabia has taken a significant gamble in using the last leverage it may have, economic leverage, after its political influence among the Sunnis in Lebanon has eroded. It therefore seems that it will not easily concede its goal of producing change in Lebanon's internal system, and in particular, weakening Hezbollah's and Iran's grip on the country by exerting simultaneous pressure on Hezbollah, the Lebanese government, and the international community. But given the weakness of Hezbollah's opponents within Lebanon, the continuation of the crisis may lead to the opposite result. For beyond its negative political and economic consequences, the crisis may actually distance Lebanon from the pragmatic countries and the West, and strengthen the influence of Hezbollah and Iran in the country.

These developments are contrary to the interests of Israel and Western countries. Therefore, it is important that Western countries, especially the United States and France, with the help of Arab officials, intervene quickly with the Gulf states to help resolve the crisis, and initiate a joint move to formulate measures to weaken Hezbollah, but without harming the Lebanese state and Hezbollah's domestic opponents.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen