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Lebanese-Saudi Relations in Crisis: Background and Likely Scenarios

Unit for Political Studies

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced at the end of October that it had asked the Lebanese ambassador in Riyadh to leave the country and recalled its ambassador in Beirut before halting all Lebanese imports and taking further hostile measures.¹ Other Gulf countries followed suit and Bahrain, followed by Kuwait, and then the United Arab Emirates, recalled their envoys from Lebanon, expelled Lebanese diplomats and asked citizens to leave the country as soon as possible. Qatar issued a statement of solidarity with Saudi Arabia and called on Lebanon to “calm the situation and to expedite the healing of the rift between the brothers.”² The unprecedented crisis between Beirut and Riyadh began after the publication of an interview with the Lebanese Minister of Information, George Kordahi, recorded last August (before his appointment as a minister), and broadcast on October 25, in which he said that the Houthi rebels were “defending themselves [...] against external aggression,” and that the war in Yemen is “futile”³ and must stop.⁴

Background

Not much was known about Lebanese Minister of Information, George Kordahi, other than that he was a presenter for both Lebanese and Saudi television channels and has spent long periods in Dubai. Besides expressing opinions pertaining to sectarian fanaticism in Lebanon, his intellectual, political or moral beliefs are unknown. His fanaticism confuses the non-Lebanese observer, who may consider his sectarian position a political one, becoming compelled to support or oppose either the so-called axis of resistance, or the Gulf states. Kordahi’s statements may be an expression of this context, in addition to superficial arrogance stemming from his background in the entertainment industry.

Therefore, Kordahi’s statements can be taken as nothing but a side effect of a crisis that has been brewing for some time in the relations between the two countries against the background of a number of developments in Lebanon and the region, prompting Saudi Arabia to take measures that many saw as not commensurate with the scale of the problem. Since 2005, Saudi Arabia has sensed a decline in its traditional influence in Lebanon, which reached its peak during the period during the mandate of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri from the early nineties until his assassination in 2005. At the same time, Iran’s influence has been rising in Lebanon, especially since the withdrawal of the Syrian army in 2005, and Hezbollah and its allies have turned into a major political force in the country, winning the majority of parliamentary seats in the 2018 elections. This diminished role of Saudi Arabia was reflected in the formation of recent governments, as Saudi Arabia was absent from the consultations on composition and had no prominent role in their formation. In late 2017, Saudi Arabia detained former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and forced him to submit his resignation

1 “Saudi Arabia Summons its Ambassador in Beirut and Asks the Lebanese Ambassador to Leave within 48 Hours,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 30/10/2021, accessed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3n41zPe>.

2 Hala Abdullah, “Qatar in talks with Lebanon amid efforts to calm GCC dispute,” *Doha News*, 1/11/2021, accessed on 11/11/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3qtnQbu>.

3 “The Information Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announces its strong astonishment and denunciation of the recent statements issued by the Minister of Information of the Lebanese Republic,” Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10/30/2021, viewed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3c2zd1y>

4 People’s Parliament, People’s Parliament 2 | Fourth session: Interrogation of George Kordahi, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjKSH_Za3AQ.



through a televised speech broadcast from Riyadh.⁵ This was due to Saudi dissatisfaction with his policies “compromising” with Hezbollah and his involvement in a “deal” under which Hezbollah ally, General Michel Aoun, was elected President of the Republic at the end of 2016 in exchange for Hariri’s return to the premiership. Hariri’s government collapsed in early 2011, with the resignation of a third of its members, when ministers affiliated with Hezbollah resigned en masse. The French government intervened to release Saad Hariri from Saudi detention and resolve the crisis with Saudi Arabia. Further eroding Saudi Arabia’s influence on Lebanon, Hariri retracted his resignation after leaving Riyadh and continued to serve as prime minister until parliamentary elections in May 2018.

In 2018, the alliance between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), led by the president’s son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, won a parliamentary majority. Nevertheless, Hariri concluded an understanding with Hezbollah and FPM, according to which he formed a government that was not accepted by Riyadh. This government did not collapse due to Saudi dissatisfaction, but rather under the impact of the protests of the widespread revolution against the sectarian quota system that Lebanon witnessed in October 2019 against the backdrop of the stifling economic and financial crisis that swept the country. These protests, which targeted what was referred to as the “political class,” only succeeded in bringing down the weakest link of this class, namely the government, and specifically Sunni politicians (the only sectarian component unarmed in the Lebanese sectarian system). As a result, Hassan Diab formed a government entirely affiliated with Hezbollah, which again collapsed following the explosion of the port of Beirut in August 2020, which resulted in the complete destruction of the port, killing nearly 200 people, wounding about 7,000 people, and displacing 300,000 others.⁶ Hezbollah and its allies are still trying to obstruct the investigation into the matter by accusing the judicial investigator of politicizing the case and preventing cabinet sessions from being held until he is dismissed.

Saudi Arabia consequently had no role in forming any of the governments under Michel Aoun’s presidency, including the most recent cabinet formed by current Prime Minister Najib Mikati, after Saad Hariri failed to form a government more than 7 months after his assignment. Hariri resigned from the government in response to the demands of the demonstrators, as he stated several times. These demands put conditions on the formation of any future government, a matter that was rejected by the president and the rest of the sectarian political parties that Hariri wanted to exclude from any future government. Saudi Arabia has also expressed its dissatisfaction with the Mikati government by ignoring its communication attempts. The Saudi attitude to the crisis should be read in this context, with Kordahi’s statements simply an excuse to air dissatisfaction. This was confirmed by Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan who said that the issue was far greater than Kordahi’s statements in a television interview. That is, the core of the issue is Hezbollah and Iran’s continued dominance of the Lebanese political system.⁷

⁵ Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, “Exclusive - Lebanon Believes that Hariri is Being Held in Saudi Arabia and Demands His Return,” Reuters, 9/11/2017, accessed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://reut.rs/3F5fGtH>.

⁶ “Lebanon: A year after the Devastating Beirut Explosion, the Authorities Brazenly Obstruct the Course of Justice,” Amnesty International, 2/8/2021, accessed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3D7u4RM>.

⁷ “Private Interview with Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs,” YouTube, 31/10/2021, accessed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/30fuqat>.



Conflict between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Forces

To understand the recent Saudi measures, it is important to take into account last month's hostilities in Lebanon, exacerbated by the ongoing investigations into the explosion of the Beirut port explosion and which threatened to erupt into a political crisis and armed confrontations. The Shi'i alliance of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah insist on obstructing the investigation into the port explosion and demand the dismissal of Judge Tarek Bitar, who is responsible for the inquiry, while the leader of the Lebanese Forces Party, Samir Geagea, seeks to present himself as a defender of victims' rights and the continued investigation to identify those responsible. Geagea is one of the most prominent opponents of Hezbollah in Lebanon, agreeing with Saudi Arabia on the need to take a stand against it and to confront the growing Iranian influence in Lebanon. Because of this position, Geagea became Saudi Arabia's closest ally in Lebanon, replacing the Future Movement, which is led by Hariri.

The rivalry between the Iranian-backed Hezbollah and the Saudi-backed Lebanese Forces party recently manifested itself in the Tayouneh incidents, which killed seven people and wounded more than thirty. The violence occurred following a sit-in called by Hezbollah and its allies in the Amal and Marada movements in front of the Palace of Justice to demand Tarek Bitar be removed from the investigation into the Beirut port explosion. The two sides pinned the responsibility for the confrontations on each other. Hezbollah denounced what happened, blaming the Lebanese forces, especially its leader, Samir Geagea, for the "Tayouneh massacre" and attempts to push the country towards a new civil war,⁸ while the latter said this was a "false accusation," and stated that the events came as a result of "the shipment that Hassan Nasrallah started four months ago."⁹ But most importantly, the demonstrations heading to the Justice Palace were armed.

In a television interview addressing the crisis with Lebanon, the Saudi foreign minister implicitly mentioned Hezbollah's position on Judge Bitar and the investigations of the port explosion. He referred to "Hezbollah's control" over state institutions, most recently the unprecedented penetration of the judiciary through rulings issued by the military court, summoning Geagea for investigation in the events of Tayouneh. Furthermore, they had already removed Fadi Sawan from the investigation into the Beirut port explosion and have since attempted to do the same to Tarek Bitar. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah declared that "justice cannot be achieved through his hands,"¹⁰ and mobilized a demonstration calling for his dismissal.

The confrontations that took place during the demonstration brought to mind images of the Lebanese civil war and led to the disruption of government activity, highlighting Hezbollah's control of the executive and legislative authorities and the judiciary. Saudi Arabia has expressed dissatisfaction

⁸ Wassim Seif El-Din, "Hezbollah: The 'Lebanese Forces' committed the Tayouneh 'massacre'", *Anadolu Agency*, 15/10/2021, accessed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3D5mjvu>.

⁹ "Beirut Clashes: Where is Lebanon Heading after Hezbollah and the Amal Movement Accuse the Lebanese Forces Party of Carrying Out an "Armed Attack"?", *BBC Arabic*, 14/10/2021, accessed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://bbc.in/3krtKG0>.

¹⁰ "Sayyed Nasrallah: The Investigative judge in the Port Explosion Politicizes the Case and Will Not Uncover Any Truth," *Al-Mayadeen*, 11/10/2021, accessed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3HclGCU>.

with this arrangement on many occasions. In April 2021, the Kingdom took a decision to stop all Lebanese fruit and vegetable imports¹¹ following an increase in attempts to smuggle drugs using agricultural imports. Saudi media accused Hezbollah of being behind these attempts, through its control over various Lebanese state agencies.¹² It also accuses the Hezbollah of helping the Houthis in Yemen by providing expertise and advice in the field of weapons manufacture and development, and in combat tactics. This has allowed the Houthis to make significant progress, recently on the Marib front, and to continue targeting the kingdom with drones.

Scenarios for a Solution

Just weeks after the formation of Najib Mikati's government, which is facing unprecedented economic and social challenges, it was hit with a two-sided crisis. First government action was blocked due to the Shi'i boycott applying pressure to push for the impeachment of Judge Bitar. Then came the diplomatic crisis with the Gulf. Before that, Mikati had hoped to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, one of Lebanon's most important markets, with total export value amounting to about \$250 million in 2020.¹³

Three possible resolutions to the crisis appear. The first is the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati, which is unlikely given the Western support that Mikati received while attending the climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, in early November. Western officials stressed the need for him to continue in his duties as Prime Minister in the interest of security and stability in the country, and in the hope of making it until the parliamentary elections scheduled for the spring of 2022. The second possibility is that the government will proceed with removing the Minister of Information, George Kordahi, from the Cabinet, or by withdrawing confidence from the House of Representatives, in the hope that this will resolve the crisis with Saudi Arabia. But again, this possibility seems to be out of the question, given Hezbollah's support for the minister. Finally, Minister Kordahi could respond to the demands of Mikati and other politicians, as well as the Lebanese street, and voluntarily submit his resignation as Minister of Information in the Lebanese government, in an attempt to resolve the crisis with Saudi Arabia.

But this possibility is only likely happen within the framework of a comprehensive deal that provides guarantees that Saudi Arabia will retract the diplomatic and economic measures it has taken against Lebanon, in addition to deciding, and removing Judge Bitar from, the port investigation. This depends on Saudi Arabia's agreement to such a settlement, which is uncertain in light of the Kingdom's insistence that the issue is not simply about Kordahi, but rather the growing influence

¹¹ "Debate in Lebanon following Saudi Arabia's Decision to Ban Lebanese Fruit Imports because of Drugs," *BBC Arabic*, 24/4/2021, accessed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://bbc.in/3krp2YY>.

¹² "Saudi Arabia Thwarts Drug Smuggling Carried out by a Network Linked to Hezbollah", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 10/9/2021, accessed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3qt3MpC>.

¹³ "In Numbers... Lebanon's Losses from Its Exports to Saudi Arabia," *The New Arab*, 30/10/2021, accessed on 11/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3n4ZrXF>.



of Hezbollah and Iran in Lebanon and the region, and that his resignation would not resolve it. This means that the kingdom is using the Kordahi matter to punish Lebanon in the hope that this will weaken Hezbollah's position and put it under internal strain, while the latter is trying to use the Kordahi matter to pressure the government to make concessions in the investigations at the Port of Beirut, and to barter Kordahi's resignation in exchange for Judge Bitar's dismissal.

Despite the stalemate, it seems that a consensus is forming between the President Michel Aoun, Prime Minister Najib Mikati, and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, that Kordahi should resign, as an initial step to reduce tension and open a dialogue with Saudi Arabia on ways to restore relations. This was indicated by the Arab League Assistant Secretary-General, Hossam Zaki, who hinted, after his visit to Lebanon, that Saudi Arabia will not consider restoring relations until Kordahi's resignation is offered as a first step.¹⁴ Saudi Arabia may view this step as a moral victory, but it does not change the fact that its ability to influence the Lebanese scene is weaker than ever. At a time when the Kingdom is taking strong steps that may affect the entire Lebanese people, due to Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon, its ally, the United Arab Emirates, which has strengthened its public alliance with Israel, is restoring full relations with the Syrian regime, a major ally of Iran and Hezbollah, which play an even greater role in Syria than they do Lebanon. How can the Saudis reconcile with this? Is it conceivable that Saudi influence in Lebanon will return through an alliance with Geagea alone? Political moves that are not governed by a vision and strategy leave onlookers baffled. More strategic clarity is necessary to reassert influence to balance Iran's role.

¹⁴ Nicola Nassif, "Zaki requests Kordahi's Resignation: He who Owns does not give," *Al-Akhbar*, 11/9/2021, accessed 11/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3C9YII0>.