

Saudi Arabia May Have Just Gifted Lebanon to Iran

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Brief Analysis

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By now, there can be no reasonable doubt that Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was detained in Saudi Arabia, and that he was forced to submit his resignation through a televised statement on a Saudi-funded network.

Irrespective of where the new Saudi leadership intended this action to fall, it is likely to end up as another gift to Iran, which has already leveraged the ill-conceived Saudi war in Yemen and the unnecessary Saudi confrontation with Qatar. However, it is still possible to rescue the situation from amounting to a permanent abandonment of Lebanon to the hands of Tehran. It requires a concerted, coordinated, and deliberate action by the United States and France.

The stakes for Riyadh in the on-going Saudi-Iranian confrontation are indeed high. In Iraq, Tehran has countered the Saudi overtures towards Baghdad with an apparent discrediting strategy aimed at any political figure or party willing to engage Saudi Arabia in the mutual and regional interest. Bolstered by its success in containing and benefitting from the aftermath of the KRG referendum, Tehran is applying multiple points of pressure, notably communitarian, but also economic and strategic. Saudi support for Kurdish independence and the open calls from Saudi Arabia for a Greater Kurdistan as a counter-weight to both Turkey and Iran have been recycled in pro-Iranian media as proof of Saudi Arabia's harmful intent towards Baghdad.

In Syria, Riyadh hoped for a more forceful U.S. policy aimed at a substantive limitation on Iranian influence. But a comprehensive vision towards Syria failed to materialize in Washington. The Trump administration today is content on accepting Russian assurances of a managed Iranian presence in Syria. Riyadh is understandably dissatisfied with the Russian promises.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah has both consolidated its systemic penetration of political and military state institutions, and established its unaccountability towards any actions it undertakes and any statements it proclaims. Open and repeated verbal attacks on Saudi Arabia and its royal family, as well as recurring reports of increased involvement in Yemen—where Hezbollah expertise was probably responsible for the Houthi missile targeting the Saudi capital—have created unprecedented tensions, notably with the Lebanese Presidency assumed by an ally of Hezbollah.

In Lebanon, in circles hostile to Hezbollah as an extension of Iran, there was an ongoing debate as to the viability of the precarious political order in effect. It was understood by all that the current arrangement, in which advocates of Lebanese sovereignty in the cabinet co-exist with Iranian proxies and allies, provides Iran with a suitable cover for

its stealth control of Lebanon. Different assessments were made in discussion about the effect of opting out of this arrangement. Hariri, a close ally of Saudi Arabia, led the majority faction that viewed that, as detrimental as it may be, co-existence in the cabinet may be the sole path to avoiding an irrevocable takeover of Lebanon. While popular as a bargaining position, the minority view calling for abandoning state institutions loyal to Hezbollah—to avoid validating Iranian control—lacked both concrete plans and leadership.

A path that Saudi Arabia could have taken, with potential major appeal inside Lebanon, would have been to engage in an effort to endow this minority vision with the tools to realize its goal. Outreach to the Lebanese Shia, whom Hezbollah has monopolized in representation and services, would have been a primordial aspect of the effort, together with a parallel engagement of Lebanese Christians, who had settled into considering Hezbollah, despite its abject Islamist ideology, as a line of defense against Sunni extremism seeping in from Syria. Another aspect, where Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman would have been instrumental, would have been to appeal to Lebanese youth regarding a future in the region based on growth, development, prosperity, and openness.

Such steps have long been advocated by Lebanese activists who viewed Saudi Arabia, despite its dramatically different social and political composition, as a natural ally against Iran's ideological expansion into their homeland and its injection of a "culture of martyrdom" into its Shia youth.

The new Saudi leadership lacked understanding of the complexities of the Lebanese situation in demanding that Lebanese political figures, seeking to renew their alliance with and reliance on Saudi Arabia, submit to an a priori act of open loyalty to the Crown Prince. Many obliged with some subtlety meant to accommodate Lebanese sensitivities, but seem to have failed to meet the diktat of the Crown Prince. In an action that invited the mockery of his opponents and the embarrassment of his supporters, Hariri signed a pledge of allegiance to the then-newly appointed Crown Prince at the Saudi Embassy in Beirut.

Raised and educated in Saudi Arabia, Muhammad bin Salman has demanded from his Lebanese ally the actions that he expects from his Saudi subjects. This is contrary to the Lebanese political ethos, and constitutes a major departure in political and social relations between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

Lebanese professionals had been an integral part of the Saudi ascension to prosperity. Lebanon, as an Arabic-speaking temperate mountain country and a haven for education, health, and entertainment, had been part of the life stories of most Saudi princes of prior generations. Despite asymmetry in wealth and reach, relations between Lebanese and Saudi politicians were historically characterized by friendship and mutual respect.

With the ascendance of a new generation of influential princes in Saudi Arabia, the stature of Lebanon and the peer-to-peer character of political relations receded. Muhammad bin Salman may not be the first Saudi prince to lack understanding of Lebanese political culture, but his recent actions amount to an irremediable break in the relationship. It is unclear what reaction, if any, the Crown Prince expected from the public humiliation and political quasi-termination of Saad Hariri, Saudi Arabia's prime asset in Lebanon. It will certainly not amount to awe and subordination. Not Iran, nor even the brutal Syrian regime during its decades-long occupation of Lebanon, ever engaged in actions as harmful to their allies, vassals, or tools. Depending on how he manages the next phase—if he is allowed a next phase—Hariri may survive this drama politically, albeit weakened. It is harder to imagine how the Saudi Arabia of Muhammad bin Salman will be able to reinstate its now-damaged status in Lebanon.

The current situation may lead Lebanon into uncharted territory. It is unlikely to yield a new civil war. The likely outcome may instead be that the cautious and meticulous approach of Iran will overcome another adventurous Saudi action. There is no ideal resolution to the situation; severe damage has already occurred. Still, there will inevitably be further damage, with Iran moving in to fill the Sunni leadership positions vacated by the impulsive Saudi move. Washington and Paris may, however, mitigate the losses by building upon France's successful move to

provide an exit path from the crisis—by helping create, through resolute, measured, and incremental steps, a viable path to a Lebanon sovereign and free from Iranian occupation. This task is harder by an order of magnitude today, due to the actions of the new Saudi Arabia. ❖

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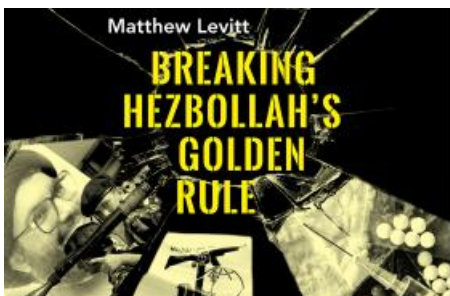
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