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Saudi Arabia’s (Bad) Options in Lebanon

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Saudi Arabia might have just conceded another victory to Iran. In Saudi minds, Saad Hariri’s “forced” resignation was supposed to signal that Saudi Arabia would no longer accept Iranian influence in Lebanon. In reality, it had unexpected results: it led to relative political unity in a country where such unity remains difficult to attain. It also strengthened Hariri’s position, as he appears to be the “only man for the job” during this period. If in the hours after the resignation there were fears Lebanon would descend into chaos – possibly leading to war – Lebanese politicians, with the help of external actors like France, were able to absorb the shock and avert the prospects of conflagration. This leaves Saudi Arabia with only bad options in Lebanon.

Saad Hariri might never explain the exact circumstances of his resignation on 4 November 2017. What is sure is that it puts Lebanon again in the centre of Middle Eastern regional politics. The election of President Aoun on 31 October 2016, after more than two years of vacancy, and the formation of the Hariri government were seen as a sign of a regional détente in Lebanon. However, with time, it became clear that Hezbollah was not willing to make any compromises. Hariri even had to accept that a Lebanese ambassador be named in Damascus. Lebanon was drawn into what Ali Akbar Vilayati, an adviser to Khamenei, described as the “axis of resistance” during his visit to Hariri on 3 November, one day before his resignation.

Wrong Bets over Hariri’s Resignation

When Saudi Arabia accepted the compromise between Aoun and Hariri a year ago, it did not expect that it would lead to another Iranian victory in the region. At a moment when the Kingdom is losing its other regional battles, Mohammed Bin Salman, the Saudi Crown Prince, decided to reverse the trend. But his gamble probably worsened the Kingdom’s positions in Lebanon.

The Saudi bet was that Sunnis would direct their anger against Hezbollah. Not only did this fail to materialize, but Hariri’s Future Current party asked for his return before making any decisions, even if its first communiqué after the resignation was inflammatory against Iran. Sunni supporters of Hariri were also in shock and eagerly waiting for his return. The Sunni “street” did not burst into demonstrations
against Hezbollah as the Saudis might have expected. Mohammed Bin Salman only managed to humiliate his Sunni ally and, through him, the whole Lebanese Sunni community.

The next Saudi option was to replace Saad Hariri with his older brother, Bahaa, who supposedly has a firmer stance against Hezbollah. This option, however, was quickly rejected by the Future Current party as well as the Hariri family. Nouhad al Mchnouk, Interior Minister, declared that partisans of Saad Hariri were not “a herd of sheep or a piece of property to hand over from one person to another […] it is not a *moubaya’a* (a loyalty pledge), there has to be elections”. The party would not just accept any member of the Hariri family. If Saad Hariri was chosen to succeed his father in 2005, it was because of the exceptional circumstances after the assassination of Rafic Hariri. Bahia Hariri, sister of the latter, also rejected this option. When it became clear that the family, the party, and even the public would not accept the nomination of Bahaa Hariri, the option was abandoned.

It was also not possible for the Saudis to choose from outside the Hariri family. Ashraf Rifi, the former director of the Internal Security Forces, once an ally of Hariri with pro-Saudi positions, would not have had the support of the Sunni community and would have been rejected by other Lebanese actors like Hezbollah. The Saudi move made Hariri irreplaceable, at least for the time being.

In addition, Hariri’s sudden resignation that was supposed to lead to divisions among the Lebanese actually served to unite them. All political parties moderated their speech: Hezbollah attacked Saudi Arabia but not Hariri himself; President Aoun was very active in “freeing” Hariri; and the Future Current party even thanked the president for his efforts. Only the Christian forces of the March 14 coalition, who are firmly opposed to Hezbollah, remained outside of this newfound – fragile – unity. They even criticized President Aoun for portraying Hariri as a detainee in Saudi Arabia. The Iranian victory is also their defeat.

**Few Options Left?**

Saudi Arabia has few options left in Lebanon. While there was fear that the Saudis would try to militarize the conflict by arming the Sunnis, the reaction of Hariri’s supporters to the resignation clearly showed that this option was not viable.
Sunnis also still have in mind what happened in May 2008 in Beirut, when Hezbollah partisans took control of the western (Sunni) parts of the city, following the decision of Fouad Siniora government to shut down Hezbollah’s telecommunications network and remove the head of security at Beirut Airport, (seen as close to the group), which led to two days of fighting in the city. If some radical – Islamist – factions are hoping for a rematch, it is not the case for the Sunni leadership.

The Saudis can turn to the financial option: 20% of the remittances – essential to the Lebanese economy – come from Saudi Arabia where around 350,000 Lebanese work, live, and send their revenues to Lebanon. Forcing them to leave would have devastating consequences for the Lebanese economy. Saudis can also choose to withdraw their capital from Lebanon: Saudi deposits at the Lebanese Central Bank amount to around 1 billion US dollars, and 80% of Foreign Direct Investment in Lebanon (around 2.5 billion dollars) comes from the Gulf countries.

Yet, while the financial option would lead to complete economic collapse, it would not change much at the political level. It will definitely not lead to the disarmament of Hezbollah, the Kingdom’s main objective, as this is not in Lebanese hands. Rather, it will only further damage Saudi Arabia’s relations with the Sunnis, as it would put all Lebanese under the same umbrella and would affect them all in the same way – with the exception of Hezbollah, whose revenues come mainly from Iran.

The only option that would actually cause some damage to Hezbollah would be an Israeli attack. Hezbollah is Saudi Arabia and Israel’s common enemy; but while Israel has been preparing for a future conflict with Hezbollah, it is not willing to fight the Kingdom’s war. It will do so in its own time.

More broadly, Hariri’s resignation and his “detention” in Saudi Arabia also triggered diplomatic efforts, especially from France and Egypt, that show that other actors are involved in preserving Lebanon’s stability and are not willing to let Saudi Arabia jeopardize it.

After his return to Lebanon on 22 November for Independence Day, Hariri decided to “suspend” his resignation. Negotiations will take place to find a new consensus
that would allow all actors – even Saudi Arabia – to save face. Hezbollah seems willing to make some concessions to save the government. If these negotiations fail, Lebanon is probably headed towards political vacuum, as no Sunni leader with real popularity would be able to replace Hariri. The latter will then head a caretaker government until the Spring 2018 elections, if these elections do indeed take place. As Nabih Berri, speaker of the Lebanese parliament, put it after the “freeing” of Hariri: “it is the end of Hariri’s crisis and the beginning of the Lebanese crisis.” However unexpectedly, Lebanon has been able to weather this storm in the best possible way.
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