



## Saudi Arabia Goes on the Offensive against Hezbollah

Joe Macaron\*

March 8, 2016

Saudi Arabia's explicit identification of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah as a strategic threat is a tipping point in the underlying tensions between both sides. In a drastic shift from nearly two years ago when the Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon, Ali Awad Al-Asiri, announced "our doors and hearts are open"<sup>1</sup> to Hezbollah, Riyadh is now launching a full-court press on two fronts: the Shiite group's influence in the Lebanese system and its role in regional conflicts.

On February 19, Saudi Arabia announced withholding \$4 billion aid package to the Lebanese security forces, with the rationale being the Lebanese government's decision to abstain from voting on a January 10 Arab League statement condemning the attack on the Saudi embassy in Iran. Furthermore, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) described Hezbollah on March 2 as "a threat to Arab security," labelling the Shiite group as a "terrorist" organization. While Riyadh has the ability to inflict significant damage on Lebanon's fragile stability and economy, such an assertive approach could further complicate the country's intricate balance and weaken the Kingdom's allies in Beirut.

### From mistrust to confrontation

In the past two years, the wars in Syria and Yemen intensified the long-standing distrust between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah. One day after the start of the Saudi-led war on Yemen last March, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah delivered a defying speech predicting a Saudi defeat. Since then, he has been relentless in criticizing Saudi policy, even more vociferously than Iranian officials do. In one of his latest speeches on February 16, he talked about an alliance between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel in Syria and hinted to Hezbollah's readiness to battle Saudi troops if they get involved on the ground in Syria.<sup>2</sup> Nasrallah also accused Riyadh of facilitating the recent car bomb attacks against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon.

Historically, Saudi Arabia stayed above the political fray in Lebanon and refrained from directly and publicly repaying Hezbollah in kind, leaving the job instead to Lebanese Future Movement leader Saad Hariri and other pro-Saudi Lebanese politicians. The major shift now is that Saudi Arabia is taking ownership of the campaign against Hezbollah. On February 24, the military adviser to the Saudi Defense Minister Brigadier Ahmad Assiri cited evidence of Hezbollah's involvement in supporting Houthi attacks against Saudi assets in Yemen.<sup>3</sup> The Saudi Interior Ministry went even further to say, on February 26, that it could not rule out the possibility that Hezbollah and Houthi rebels were smuggling drugs into the Kingdom along the border with Yemen.<sup>4</sup>

This is not the first drug smuggling accusation in the tug of war between both sides. A member of the Saudi royal family was detained on October 26 in Rafic Hariri International Airport in Beirut along

<sup>1</sup> Asiri denies ties with Hezbollah frozen despite political differences. *Naharnet*. April 18, 2013. <http://m.naharnet.com/stories/en/79883-asiri-denies-ties-with-hizbullah-frozen-despite-political-differences>

<sup>2</sup> Nasrallah says regime, allies don't fear Saudi-Turkish op in Syria. *Naharnet*. February 16, 2016. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/202325>

<sup>3</sup> Lebanon must act on Hezbollah in Yemen, says Saudi. *Al Arabiya*. February 24, 2016. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/02/24/Yemeni-govt-says-have-evidence-Hezbollah-is-involved-in-backing-the-Houthis.html>

<sup>4</sup> Saudi Arabia: Hezbollah and Houthis may be running drugs. *The Daily Star Lebanon*. February 26, 2016. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Feb-26/339280-saudi-arabia-hezbollah-and-houthis-may-be-running-drugs.ashx>

with five Saudi nationals for attempting to smuggle drugs out of Lebanon on a private plane.<sup>5</sup> Few days after withholding Saudi military aid, a Lebanese newspaper close to Hezbollah published the minutes of his conviction, although the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon raised doubts about the investigation.

In this ongoing media and intelligence war, Riyadh delivered a blow to Hezbollah and Iran with the help of US intelligence. For example, Ahmed Ibrahim al-Mughassil was arrested last August in Rafic Hariri International Airport upon his arrival from Iran.<sup>6</sup> He is a Hezbollah operative who was behind the June 25, 1996 attack on US Air Force barracks in Khobar, Saudi Arabia that killed 19 American servicemen. The Information Branch, a Lebanese security service close to Saudi Arabia, held al-Mughassil for few hours at the airport before immediately handing him over to Saudi authorities. Interestingly, the military aid to Lebanon withheld by Saudi Arabia includes the Security Forces controlled by the Saudi-backed Future Movement. However, beyond the unchecked and controversial clandestine activities conducted by the group with minimal constraints, Hezbollah remains vulnerable at home.

### **Stretched over two borders**

Hezbollah's overreach policy has been expanding across the Middle East, from Syria to Iraq and Yemen, in a newfound role after the "Arab Spring" where the "Party of God" chose to be on the forefront of the Iranian-Saudi confrontation. Hezbollah perceives an existential threat to its long-term military capacity building in the eventual fall of President Bashar Assad's regime in Syria. Challenging the impression that the Shiite group is spread too thin in Syria, Hezbollah's leadership has also been heightening the rhetoric against Israel, hinting on February 16 to the group's ability to strike ammonia gas facilities in Haifa that "could have the result of a nuclear bomb."<sup>7</sup>

Stretched on two borders with Israel and Syria, the Shiite group has been looking for calm at home. Hezbollah and the Future Movement launched in December 2014 several rounds of discussions aimed at defusing the mounting sectarian tensions between the two groups as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was aggressively infiltrating the Lebanese borders at that time. However, as Hezbollah moved to direct confrontation with the Syrian rebels, tensions in Lebanon started to flare. Saudi escalation in the near future will determine whether these talks between Hezbollah and the Future Movement will be halted. As of now, there is no indication they will be.

The Lebanese political crisis is currently going through a critical juncture. The presidential race is shuffling alliances in both the "March 8" camp led by Hezbollah and the "March 14" camp led by the Future Movement. The Saudi move is increasingly seen as a blow to Hariri himself. Five days after his long awaited return to Lebanon on February 14 to lead a campaign in support of Suleiman Franjeh's candidacy for the presidency, he had to face the reality of a new Saudi approach toward Lebanon. Hariri, who is facing defection among his ranks and loosing strong alliances in "March 14", has been keen to strike a deal to end the political deadlock, however an open confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah will likely undermine his efforts.

<sup>5</sup> Tamara Kiblawi and Susannah Cullinane. Saudi Prince held on suspicion of drug smuggling in Lebanon. *CNN*. October 27, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/27/middleeast/lebanon-saudi-prince-drugs/>

<sup>6</sup> Ali Hashem. With Khobar's bomber arrest, Saudi Arabia deals blow to Iran. *Al-Monitor*. August 31, 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/lebanon-saudi-arrest-mughassil-assir.html>

<sup>7</sup> Vasudevan Sridharan. Hezbollah's Nasrallah threatens nuclear-like attack on Israeli ammonia storage facility. *International Business Times*. February 17, 2016. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/hezbollahs-nasrallah-threatens-nuclear-like-attack-israeli-ammonia-storage-facility-1544324>

## National unity or Arab consensus

Lebanon's long-standing policy of dissociation, or staying neutral in foreign policy, is being vigorously tested since the start of the war in Syria. The diplomatic dilemma in the Lebanese cabinet is whether to prioritize national unity by standing with Hezbollah or adhere to the Arab consensus by supporting Saudi Arabia. During an Arab interior ministers' meeting on March 2, the Lebanese Interior Minister Nouhad Machnouk, a member of the Future Movement, condemned Hezbollah's military intervention in the region but objected to the final statement<sup>8</sup> that labels Hezbollah as a "terrorist" group, in an attempt by Machnouk to preserve the unity of the Lebanese government. Indeed, the current status quo in the cabinet, albeit weak, still stands as the only and last legitimate institution to govern the country.

Lebanon seems to weather yet another storm, as political rivals are lowering the rhetoric and preparing an official visit to Riyadh to mend fences. Yet, the feud between Saudi Arabia and Iran's proxy Hezbollah is far from over. The challenge for both sides lies in finding a way to manage their conflict without further exacerbating Lebanese politics.

Lebanon is one of the last countries in the Levant where Saudi Arabia still enjoys significant political leverage; undermining this leverage will only strengthen Iran's stance. Saudi Arabian allies in Lebanon are unable or unwilling to engage Hezbollah in a direct military or political confrontation; hence they will only appear weak and irrelevant if they sit on the sidelines of an escalating Saudi feud with Hezbollah.

Indeed, the main challenge for the Saudi assertive regional policy is that it has no endgame. Lebanon and Yemen are two examples where Washington and Riyadh have differences in tactics and priorities. While pressuring Hezbollah is a plausible idea, the US should continue to stress the importance of maintaining Lebanon's security and fiscal stability as well as the ability of the security forces to perform their duties in the midst of tremendous domestic and regional challenges. The United States has no appetite for the destabilization of yet another fragile country in the Middle East.

*\*Joe Macaron is a Washington-based Middle East Analyst affiliated with the Arab Center Washington DC.*

*Arab Center Washington DC (ACW) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit 501 (c)(3) research organization founded in 2014 in Washington, DC. Its research activities focus on the Arab World and US foreign policy in the Middle East.*

---

<sup>8</sup> Bassil's stance at Arab Forums not similar to mine: Machnouk. *The Daily Star Lebanon*. March 3, 2016. <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Mar-03/340355-bassils-stance-at-arab-forums-not-similar-to-mine-machnouk.ashx>