



Aoun in Riyadh: A Test for Lebanon's Foreign Policy

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In November 2014, General Michel Aoun [told](#) the Lebanese daily newspaper, *As-Safir*, that the late Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal was behind a veto to elect him as president. A little over two years after that statement, now President Aoun, the close ally of the Iranian backed Hezbollah, made his first official visit abroad to Riyadh on January 9-10, 2017. This symbolic visit raised questions about Saudi Arabia's influence in Lebanon and how the country will factor into the Saudi-Iranian dynamic in 2017.

Saudi and Lebanese officials have been paving the way for this visit since the consensus over Aoun emerged last October. The official invitation was delivered in person by Prince Khaled al-Faisal, the emissary of Saudi Arabia's King Salman, who visited Beirut on November 21, 2016. Aoun also had a stop in Qatar on January 11-12, 2017 as part of his first official tour abroad. The embrace of Aoun in Riyadh comes nearly a year after the Saudi government took a series of punitive measures against Lebanon in an attempt to counter Hezbollah's influence in the Lebanese state.

Last February, the Saudi government [withheld](#) \$4 billion aid package to the Lebanese armed forces. This was after the Lebanese government decided to abstain from voting on an Arab League statement condemning the attack on the Saudi embassy in Iran in protest of the Saudi execution of the Shiite Cleric Nimr al-Nimr. Riyadh simultaneously issued a travel advisory for its citizens not to travel to Lebanon. Furthermore, in March 2016 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) labeled Hezbollah a "terrorist organization."

Aoun's overarching objective during the visit was [in his words](#) to "dispel ambiguities" in the relations with Riyadh. The Lebanese government hopes to resume Saudi financial support to the Lebanese security forces, restore full diplomatic relations with the appointment of a new Saudi ambassador, and revive economic relations between the two countries, in particular regarding tourism and investments. However, the most important factor from the Saudi perspective is where the Lebanese government stands vis-à-vis Iran.

The road to Riyadh

The Saudi influence in Lebanon was consolidated in the 1989 National Reconciliation Accord, known as the Ta'if agreement, which ended the Lebanese civil war that began in 1975. The

expansion of the powers of the prime minister over those of the president, and the recognition of Hezbollah as a “resistance force” (rather than a militia) fighting Israel, were the two landmarks of this agreement. In addition, one of its crucial byproducts was the 1991 treaty of mutual cooperation between Beirut and Damascus which basically gave Syria full control over Lebanon’s politics and security. In return, Saudi Arabia’s leverage over the Lebanese economy began to grow.

The Saudi-Syrian collaboration in Lebanon began to fade after the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. What followed was a failed US, French, and Saudi attempt to deter the Syrian-Iranian influence in the country. The distrust between Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia grew after the July 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon and the May 2008 internal fighting that was sparked by the Lebanese government decision to shut down Hezbollah’s telecommunications network. At that time, Saudi Arabia [raised](#) the idea of deploying an “Arab army” to restore stability in Lebanon; however, there was no appetite in Washington to maximize US intervention in Lebanon. Ultimately, rival Lebanese factions reached a deal after talks sponsored by Qatar in May 2008. The Doha Agreement launched the Lebanese National Dialogue as an unofficial format for continuing the talks and led to the election of President Michel Suleiman as a consensus and neutral president.

The turning point involved two consequential events in early 2011. In January, after an impasse around the international Special Tribunal investigating the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, the March 8 alliance ousted the cabinet of Prime Minister Saad Hariri as he was entering the White House to meet former President Barack Obama. Two months later, in March 2011, the Syrian revolution began and the Syrian regime no longer had significant leverage in Lebanese politics. Against this background, former Prime Minister Najib Miqati assumed power between June 2011 and February 2014 and implemented what was known as “the dissociation policy,” which implied keeping Lebanon away from the regional conflict in Syria. Under his premiership, the growing divide between Hezbollah and the Future Movement led to a paralysis of the central government. Hence, the Syrian-Lebanese border became open to smuggling weapons and fighters. This eventually led to a growing influence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) fighters on the Lebanese-Syrian border before Hezbollah began a direct military intervention in the Syrian war.

As chaos in Syria began to grow and Syrian refugees flowed into Lebanon, former Prime Minister Tammam Salam took over from Miqati in February 2014. Miqati, who was perceived as pro-Syrian by Hariri, came under pressure by both Hezbollah and the Future Movement before submitting his resignation. Salam emerged as a moderate figure to govern and enjoyed the support of Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Hezbollah and Aoun decided to disregard former President Michel Suleiman, arguing that he was edging closer to Saudi Arabia and no longer playing the neutral role he was elected to play. The significant shift came in the second part of 2014 when

ISIL began to seize control of the Lebanese-Syrian border and launch suicide attacks inside Lebanon, mainly in areas under the control of Hezbollah. After boycotting each other since the sacking of Hariri's cabinet in January 2011, the Saudi backed Future Movement and the Iranian backed Hezbollah launched ongoing rounds of weekly discussions since December 2014 around these security developments at a time when the Sunni-Shiite polarization was reaching its peak. In fact, the same day that President Aoun was in Riyadh, representatives from the Future Movement and Hezbollah were meeting in Beirut. Subsequently, security and political decisions taken in the past three years succeeded in restoring stability on the border and across the country.

Lebanon's foreign policy under Aoun

What Aoun has offered in Riyadh is turning the page on the "dissociation policy," suggesting instead a yet-to-be-articulated new policy approach with the following components: 1) the Lebanese government will continue to play an active role in curbing the flow of terrorists and weapons across the Lebanese-Syrian border; 2) the Lebanese government will speak up against Hezbollah intervention in Syria, but it will not attempt to prevent it on the ground; 3) Lebanon will stand by the Arab League consensus unless its decision is in contradiction with the Lebanese consensus, i.e. language on Hezbollah; and 4) Lebanon will remain neutral in the feud between any two Arab countries.

In the press appearance with his Lebanese counterpart Gebran Bassil, Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir [noted](#) on January 10, 2017 that his country "aims for Lebanon to become an independent state free from foreign intervention." The statement is a significant shift from the Saudi stance a year ago and an acknowledgement that the Lebanese government has neither the will nor the capacity to rein in Hezbollah's influence. This controversial issue was not on the table in the deal to elect Aoun last October. Indeed, neither the Lebanese government nor the Lebanese allies of Saudi Arabia are alone able to curb Hezbollah's regional activities; what Aoun is offering instead is to walk a fine line. The Lebanese president spoke against Hezbollah's intervention in Syria during his trip to Riyadh, and his foreign minister (and son-in-law) Gebran Bassil [stated](#) in November 2016 that all foreign armed groups, including Hezbollah, should withdraw from Syria. Beyond that, Aoun and Hariri are in agreement that in such a deeply divided political environment the Lebanese government can only offer to secure its own border.

Saudi economic leverage in Lebanon

The Lebanese economy's dependence on Saudi Arabia has been further institutionalized in the past two decades. It is estimated that 350,000 Lebanese nationals are working in Saudi Arabia and [sending](#) annual remittances to Lebanon equal to \$4.5 billion. Fifty percent of the Lebanese industrial production goes to the GCC countries (and 25 percent of that to Saudi Arabia) while 70 percent of Lebanese agricultural products are [exported](#) to GCC countries. Furthermore, 85

percent of foreign direct investment in Lebanon is from GCC countries (50 percent Saudi capital) and seven out of ten Lebanese major banks have Saudi investments. The number of [Saudi tourists](#) visiting Lebanon was around 350,000 annually before 2010 and decreased to 40,000 last year, leaving a devastating impact on the tourism sector. While the Saudi travel advisory is still in place, the number of Saudi tourists visiting Lebanon has increased in the past weeks.

Saudi Arabian King Salman instructed his advisers and ministers to follow up on the issues that Aoun raised; however, no significant shift should be expected immediately. Riyadh will likely appoint a new ambassador and rescind the travel advisory, while it might amend the Saudi donation to the Lebanese security forces. With Saudi Arabia facing its own fiscal crisis, the era of blank checks to the Lebanese government and other allies is over.

Lebanon in 2017

While Aoun would not have stayed politically relevant in the presidential impasse for over two years without Hezbollah's support, he also would not have been elected president without the votes of the Saudi-backed Hariri. Over 80 days into the new Lebanese presidency, the deal that elected Aoun remains important: on the one hand, Hezbollah's support in return for leeway in the group's regional activities, and on the other hand, Hariri's endorsement in return for staying neutral and recognizing the Ta'if Accord, the trademark of Saudi influence in Lebanon, which was challenged by Aoun in 1989.

Aoun's visit to Riyadh will impact what might happen in Lebanese politics in 2017. His balancing act has been successful so far, yet he came back empty-handed from his visit. The Saudi leadership wants to test Aoun and see how he will maneuver challenges in Lebanon, Syria, and beyond. Hariri and Aoun will likely be allied in the parliamentary election next summer along, probably, with both Samir Geagea (leader of Lebanese Forces) and Walid Joumblatt (leader of the Progressive Socialist Party), while Hezbollah and the Amal Movement will run their own list in predominantly Shiite areas. This alliance will help Hariri escape any obstruction from Hezbollah; yet with the unpredictability of the new US administration and the Syrian war, both Lebanon's foreign policy and the Aoun-Hariri alliance will be tested. While Saudi Arabia is running out of options in projecting power in Lebanon, and with Hezbollah recently converting enemies to friends in Lebanese politics, maintaining a neutral Lebanese government is the best Saudi Arabia can get out of Lebanon in the current status quo.

Lebanon and the Trump Administration

It is safe to say that, in the foreseeable future, Lebanon will not be high on President Donald Trump's agenda. The extent of Washington's interest will be to reemphasize the need to fight ISIL. For now, Saudi Arabia and Iran are in agreement on Lebanon. If the Trump Administration decided to deter Iran's regional activities, it will have the support of Riyadh. This will likely

have a direct impact on Lebanon's political stability. What happens in Lebanon, from a US policy perspective, will largely depend on the Trump Administration's overall Middle East policy.