

Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Lebanon

Hussein Mawla

PhD in international relations and diplomacy,

Islamic University of Lebanon.

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Abstract

The strategic importance of both Saudi Arabia and Iran has grown in the Middle East region, which is a permanent theater for the interactions of these two countries, and this is reflected in the countries of the region, which have witnessed strategic transformations and changes since the beginning of the last decade, which put them in a struggle over areas of influence, including Lebanon, and with the change in the form of Governance in Saudi Arabia With the arrival of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi foreign policy changed to an offensive policy. He began what he called “Decisive Storm” in Yemen, and intensified support for Syrian armed groups. In response to Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria, Saudi Arabia initially requested... In 2016, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries banned their citizens from

visiting Lebanon, and a previous Saudi-French agreement to arm the Lebanese army was cancelled, and prompted the Gulf Cooperation Council to consider Hezbollah a “terrorist organization.” Saudi Arabia announced cutting off financial support for Lebanon, preventing its citizens from traveling there, and taking other economic and commercial measures. Some Gulf countries have taken a similar position.

Despite all the positive Saudi openness in the region, it does not seem that the positive openness has withdrawn or will withdraw to Lebanon, because Saudi Arabia is asking for concessions from Lebanon, by devoting its political influence there, and ensuring that Lebanon is not a launching pad for actions that affect the Gulf states, according to the Saudi opinion, and these concessions It is not possible

today, and therefore the Lebanese-Saudi relationship will remain frosty indefinitely.

Saudi-Iranian relations have garnered increasing global attention due to the growing strategic importance of these two countries over the past decades. The Middle East region has become a permanent stage for the interactions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This is reflected in the countries of the region, which have witnessed significant strategic transformations and changes as a result of the conflict since the beginning of the last decade. These regional roles, both locally and internationally, are due to the strategic dimension of the region, making it a subject of interest.

Saudi-Iranian relations have passed through multiple stages, taken different paths, and been affected by local, regional, and international circumstances and factors. These forces have compelled the countries to move from one stage to another in accordance with the interests of both nations, the goals of their foreign policies, and the possibilities of influence. In the region, internal, regional, and international factors also influenced the rapprochement or divergence of relations between the two countries, according to the interests of both sides and

international interests. This led to a multiplication of disputes and fueled a state of rivalry and conflict, but it did not push them into direct conflict or war. Both countries were aware of the consequences of such a conflict on the region as a whole, not just on their own nations.

The current period is considered the most tense stage in Saudi-Iranian relations. The region has witnessed internal, regional, and international events that have accelerated actions and reactions, leading to chaos and collisions with fluctuations and tensions, bringing the two countries into a new, undeclared cold war.

In this discussion, we will explore Saudi-Iranian relations in the Middle East region, focusing on their struggle over areas of influence and examining the dimensions of this competition for the future of the Middle East, particularly Lebanon.

*** Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Lebanon**

The factors governing Saudi-Iranian relations involve competition and conflict, especially in the regional framework. The Middle East has been, and continues to be, a theatre of competitive processes between the two countries. This state of competition has led to the formation of many alliances and counter-alliances. With the beginning

of the Arab Spring in several countries in the region, the scene turned into an Iranian-Saudi conflict outside the territories of the two countries. Saudi-Iranian positions have differed in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon.

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia remains one of the most significant forms of regional rivalry that can determine the strategic landscape of the Middle East. Although this rivalry is longstanding, it is gaining special importance now, with one of its most prominent arenas being Lebanon. The political relations between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon have endured for decades, with Saudi Arabia supporting Lebanon economically and politically through its most difficult times. This support includes the Taif Agreement, which ended the Lebanese civil war. However, these relations began to deteriorate in 2011, with the fall of the Arab initiative with Syria and the subsequent political changes.

The arrival of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to power in 2015 brought significant changes to Saudi Arabia's foreign

policy. His initial “offensive” policy has since evolved to “zeroing problems” and then to “positive neutrality”, aiming to establish Saudi Arabia as a regional leader from the Gulf to North Africa¹. Within this region, Saudi Arabia aspires to be more than a spectator in Lebanon, given its historical influence.

The essence and form of government in Saudi Arabia changed with the arrival of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as did foreign policy. The “Decisive Storm” campaign in Yemen and support for Syrian armed groups were intensified in response to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria. In early 2016, Saudi Arabia took several measures, including asking Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to prevent their citizens from visiting Lebanon, cancelling a Saudi-French agreement to arm the Lebanese army, and pushing the GCC to consider Hezbollah a “terrorist organization.” Saudi Arabia announced cutting financial support to Lebanon, banning travel to the country, and other economic measures, which some Gulf countries mirrored.

¹ Laila Nicola, Saudi-Lebanese Relations: What-Does-Saudi-Want-From-Lebanon? Al-Mayadeen website, 07/06/2023:

<https://www.almayadeen.net/articles/>

Several factors contributed to this rupture:

1- Saudi Arabia pushed Hariri to reunite his movement and his public and rebuild the “March 14 Forces”, in preparation for the Lebanese entitlements, the first of which are the municipal and optional elections, in May 2016.

2- “The Lebanese Army leadership rejected a Saudi request that its border measures not be limited to Sunni groups, but rather include Hezbollah to paralyze its movement capabilities along the eastern border, and the Lebanese Army also refused to allow the Islamic Coalition Forces to use the Qlayaat military airport in northern Lebanon².”

3- Beirut refused to condemn the attack on the Saudi diplomatic mission in Iran in December 2015.

4- The failure to release Saudi Prince “Abdul Mohsen bin Al-Walid”, who was arrested in October 2015 for attempting to smuggle drugs from Lebanon. It is believed that the Saudi authorities tried to put pressure on the

Lebanese government to force the pro-Iranian Hezbollah, which is trying to blackmail the Kingdom in exchange for the prince’s release, to deal with it more flexibly in Lebanon’s issues - he was released in April 2020 at the end of his sentence.

5- Saying that “the number of Shiite officers in the Lebanese Army has increased significantly to reach 26.8% of the total number of its forces, after it did not exceed 15% previously, in addition to Shiites obtaining sensitive positions in the Lebanese Army.”³

6- Lebanon abstained from voting on an Arab Foreign Ministers decision demanding Iran to stop supporting militias and armed parties within Arab countries⁴.

7- The most confrontational era in Iranian-Saudi relations in decades, leading to proxy wars for regional leadership.

The Saudi decision to cut financial support was also influenced by regional motives, including the desire to counterbalance Iranian

² Lebanese Ambassador, Saudi Arabia does not obtain army “guarantees” so it withholds weapons, February 24, 2016

³ Musa Naila, Loyalties and the Formation of Groups in the Lebanese Officer Corps, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2-24-2016.

<https://carnegie-mec.org/2016/02/03/ar-62532/it>

⁴ Lebanese politics ranges between Saudi-Iranian disputes, Al-Sabil 1-3-2016.

influence in Lebanon through Hezbollah, in addition to “Saudi Arabia’s desire to gain a foothold in Lebanon, to be a thorn in the side of the Syrian regime after Russia and Iran had great achievements alongside Bashar al-Assad’s forces”⁵. Saudi Arabia tried to exert popular pressure on Iran’s ally in Lebanon, “Hezbollah,” based on the fact that an armed party outside the will of the Lebanese people controls Lebanese authority and decision-making. However, this aggressive policy was counterproductive, as it opened the door for a greater influence of Iran in Lebanon. The presidential settlement in 2016 brought Hezbollah's ally, Michel Aoun, to the presidency. Although the Saudis did not oppose the settlement, they were not supportive either despite the fact that President Aoun visited Riyadh in his first foreign visit as President of the Republic.

In the summer of 2017, Lebanon eliminated the terrorist threat supported by Saudi Arabia through military cooperation between Hezbollah and the Lebanese army against Al-Nusra Front and ISIS, with the support and cover of the President

of the Lebanese Republic, Michel Aoun. However, later that year, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was detained in Saudi Arabia, leading to a diplomatic crisis. The Saudi Minister of State for Arab Gulf Affairs, “Thamer Al-Sabhan”, announced that Saudi Arabia: “will treat the Lebanese government as a declaration of war because of the Hezbollah militias”⁶. He also stated that Hezbollah has become a tool of killing and destruction against Saudi Arabia, and participates in all terrorist acts in the Kingdom,” noting that “there are attempts in Lebanon by Hezbollah to distract Lebanon’s attention and remove the risks and say that there is a forced resignation process for Hariri,” adding that the matter “ “Very sensitive and disturbing.”

Hariri's resignation from Saudi Arabia was seen as an attempt to curb Iran, but it backfired. This came a year after Hariri headed the government that included Hezbollah ministers, as the Saudis found that Hezbollah’s influence was increasing. They were angry and threatened to withdraw financial support.

⁵ Elias Samer, Iran and Saudi Arabia compete for leadership and proxy wars, so what next?, Russia Today website, 2-24-2016.

⁶ Al-Sabhan in a phone interview with Al-Arabiya channel on Monday, November 6, 2017

At that time, Hariri “thought he was going to discuss economic projects, but he was surprised by a list of economic sanctions that the Saudis had placed against Lebanon, threatening to expel more than 160,000 Lebanese working in the Gulf states, and to pressure Gulf investors to withdraw their investments from Lebanon. Hariri found himself faced with a disastrous situation for the Lebanese economy, so he was forced to word his resignation letter in a way that he believed would satisfy Saudi Arabia”⁷.

After his resignation, Hariri spent two weeks in Riyadh amid speculation that he was being held by the Saudi authorities. They told him: “If you return to Lebanon, we consider you like Hezbollah, and we consider your government an enemy, and we will punish Lebanon just as we punished Qatar.”⁸ In reference to the land, sea and air blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia on Qatar in June 2017, against the backdrop of its claim that Qatar supports terrorism and threatens the Gulf states. After intervention from France, Hariri returned to Beirut, suspended his resignation, and then retracted it,

which increased his popularity. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir stated at the time that “there will be no peace in Lebanon as long as Hezbollah remains armed.”

In 2018, the Lebanese parliamentary elections took place and shifted the parliamentary majority in favor of Hezbollah and its allies, who won the majority of the seats in the Lebanese parliament, and now he controlled the Presidency of the Republic, the Presidency of the House of Representatives, and the parliamentary majority, at a time when Riyadh accuses “Saad Hariri” (the Prime Minister) of being weak and an ally for Hezbollah. This change, coupled with Trump's "maximum pressure" policy on Iran, further strained Saudi-Lebanese relations.

Indeed, the year 2018 was pivotal in Lebanon and the region, as Trump unilaterally withdrew from the Iranian nuclear agreement and announced a “policy of maximum pressure” on Iran and its allies in the region. Lebanon was affected for several reasons: the presence of Hezbollah, and the imbalance of political power as a result of the presidential settlement, but it

⁷ Behind the scenes of Hariri's resignation 12/9/2017: www.sputinkarabic.ae

⁸ The previous reference.

succeeded in getting rid of terrorism and securing the Lebanese-Syrian borders, and it succeeded in the battle to oust Hariri from Saudi Arabia, and it was able to hold parliamentary elections, even if its results were contrary to the regional and international will.

Since then, Saudi Arabia has dealt with Lebanon with escalation, as any statement issued by an official or minister was exploited to spark a diplomatic crisis between Lebanon and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, including the statement of Information Minister “George kordahi” about the Yemen war, which prompted Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait and The UAE withdrew its ambassadors from Beirut, and the first three countries asked their counterparts to leave.

Questions remain about Saudi Arabia's next move in Lebanon⁹. If the situation escalates further, it could lead to economic collapse due to the significant contributions of Lebanese expatriates in the Gulf, which account for a large portion of remittances and bank deposits in Lebanon. The Gulf countries are also major markets for

Lebanese exports, and any disruption could have severe economic repercussions.

Bank deposits in Lebanon are estimated at approximately 150 billion dollars, including 25 billion dollars for Lebanese expatriates in the Gulf countries, meaning that if the Lebanese working in the Gulf are deported, this will lead to a significant decrease in Lebanese bank deposits months later, similar to what happened in the 1992 crisis.

“The percentage of remittances from Lebanese working abroad is about 8.7 billion dollars annually, 55% of which coming from the Gulf countries (about 70% from Saudi Arabia), which is approximately 4.7 billion dollars, noting that the number of workers in the Gulf countries is approximately 750 thousand Lebanese, most of whom are in Saudi Arabia.”¹⁰.

“The Gulf countries are the first market for Lebanese exports, especially Saudi Arabia, which imports about 75% of Lebanon’s agricultural exports, as well as 53% of industrial exports.”¹¹In this context, Saudi Arabia is trying, by

⁹ Seven numbers explain Lebanon's relationship with the Gulf economically Al Jazeera website, 2/26/2016.

¹⁰ The previous reference.

¹¹ Lebanese Ambassador, Saudi Arabia does not obtain army guarantees, so it withholds weapons, February 24, 2016.

uncovering drug smuggling in agricultural products, to reduce the volume of imports from Lebanon, by finding pretexts. Additionally, it always accuses networks and people working for Hezbollah and Iran in order to undermine the security of the Kingdom. We note that Gulf markets today no longer buy Lebanese products on a regular basis.

Moreover, “The value of Saudi real estate in Lebanon amounts to \$6 billion.”¹²This in itself is enough to negatively affect the Lebanese real estate market. Here it is necessary to approach the economic support of both Saudi Arabia and Iran for Lebanon. This highlights the importance of Saudi financial and economic support for Lebanon, both as an economy and as a state, since the Taif Agreement in 1989, as “Saudi Arabia pumped more than 70 billion dollars into the Lebanese economic cycle between 1990 and 2015, directly and indirectly, between investments, aid, grants and gifts, soft loans and deposits in banks, and, in addition to previous contributions, a financial deposit worth one billion dollars during the 2006 war.”¹³

In contrast, “the Iranians provided only \$25 million to rebuild roads and restore infrastructure in Lebanon in 2007, and some blankets, food aid, and humanitarian aid via Hezbollah.”¹⁴However, everyone knows that Iran has always declared that it is always ready to help the Lebanese state, in securing oil derivatives and building electricity production plants and other projects, but the Lebanese government has not and will not accept any Iranian offer for fear of the wrath of the United States of America.

There is no room for comparison between Saudi Arabia’s contributions and Iran’s contributions. The Kingdom provides aid to legitimate institutions such as the Lebanese Army, as well as clear donations for development, building bridges, public facilities. However, while Iran’s contributions go to Hezbollah, and its relationship with the party is a dependency relationship that reinforces the concept of a state within a state, as precise figures for the size of Iranian contributions to Hezbollah are absent. This Iranian aid is almost limited to Hezbollah, which has a dependency relationship with

¹² The previous reference

¹³ Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper, Friday, February 26, 2016, Issue No. 13604.

¹⁴ Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, previous reference.

Iran and is spent, in addition to some of the aforementioned works, on social institutions affiliated with the party such as the Martyr Foundation and the Jihad Foundation. The party's construction and military sector receive the largest share of Iran's contributions."¹⁵ It is noteworthy that this Iranian support provided to Hezbollah comes "outside the context of any budget and any transparency, and does not contribute to the economic activity in the country, does not contribute to serving the Lebanese citizen, and does not bring tax income to the state treasury, unlike Saudi support."¹⁶ However, this money belongs to the people of the resistance and contributes to the economic activity in the country, although in a smaller amount than the contributions of Lebanese expatriates.

With the development of regional events, the crisis escalated towards further deterioration that would bring Lebanon into the tunnel of Saudi-Iranian confrontation, "through additional measures that the Gulf states could take towards Lebanese nationals who reside and work on their territories, which

contributes to negatively impacting the already deteriorating economic situation." "It leads to the possibility of chaos that will affect the security and social situation."¹⁷.

We note that Hezbollah responded to the Saudi decision to stop arming the Lebanese army and cut off financial and economic support by saying, "This decision did not surprise anyone at all in Lebanon. The relevant officials in the government, the relevant ministries, the military establishment, and the security forces departments were fully aware that this decision was made a long time ago, as Saudi Arabia has always depended on Lebanon and its official position on this aid and forcing Saad Hariri to resign in 2017 is only evidence of this dependency."¹⁸ In all its speeches, Hezbollah continues to attack the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in exchange for Saudi accusations that the party is controlling the state in Lebanon, aiding the Syrian regime, and assisting the Houthis in their war with Saudi Arabia. Hezbollah has been classified as a terrorist by the Gulf Cooperation Council, and "the Iranian position is to declare its full

¹⁵ The previous reference.

¹⁶ The previous reference.

¹⁷ The previous reference.

¹⁸ NewspaperAn-Nahar, 24-2-2016.

readiness to assist Beirut militarily if it requests it.”¹⁹.

Today, despite all the positive Saudi openness in the region, it does not seem that the positive openness has been withdrawn in Lebanon, so what does Saudi Arabia want from Lebanon to restore relations to normal?

To understand what Saudi Arabia wants from Lebanon, one must consider the Kuwaiti initiative of January 2022, led by Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, after the crisis of George Qordahi’s statements, and it includes conditions for the return of Gulf relations with Lebanon, defined as follows²⁰:

- 1- Commitment to the Taif Agreement.
- 2- Lebanese forces stop “verbal and practical aggression against Arab countries, specifically the Gulf, and adhere to the policy of dissociation.”
- 3- Carrying out comprehensive reforms and border monitoring.
- 4- Ensuring that Lebanon is not a launching pad for any terrorist acts

that destabilize the stability and security of the region

5- Ensuring Lebanon is not a launching pad for terrorist acts that destabilize the solidity and security of the region

6- The necessity of restricting weapons to legitimate state institutions.

7- Implementing relevant UN Security Council Resolutions (1559), (1701), and (1608) and relevant international and Arab resolutions.

There is no doubt that the last clauses are the bottom line.

Some Lebanese have imagined that the Saudi-Iranian understanding will push Saudi Arabia to accept the French initiative, which calls for the election of Suleiman Franjeh as president of the republic in exchange for the election of “Nawaf Salam” as prime minister.

However, by observing the course of change in Saudi foreign policy in the region, its openness to understanding with Iran, and its establishment, by returning Syria to the Arab League, we find that Saudi Arabia will not make fundamental concessions in its policy in Lebanon, as it will not accept the return of

¹⁹ Iran is entering the crisis line between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, Tuesday, February 26, 2016.

²⁰ Laila Nicola, Saudi-Lebanese Relations: What-Does-Saudi-Want-From-Lebanon? Al-Mayadeen website, 07/06/2023

relations with Lebanon to their previous state, without a settlement that would consolidate its political influence in it. Saudi Arabia's stance towards Lebanon is motivated by its aspiration to exert substantial influence over the appointment of Lebanon's next President and Prime Minister. Saudi Arabia seeks to ensure that the Prime Minister would secure the establishment of a government that is not controlled by Hezbollah, in line with Saudi interests. This position is a component of a more comprehensive plan to strengthen Saudi Arabia's influence in the area while simultaneously opposing and diminishing Iranian presence and authority.

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