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Middle East

Lebanon in the crucible of regional conflict

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Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri recently threatened to resign and bring down the government, opening a new period of instability in a country that has recently had a sustained but fragile peace. In the weeks since the initial announcement, Hariri has reversed himself and now promises to continue in office.

Hariri's surprise announcement shocked Middle East commentators, but it was only the latest symptom of a brewing conflict between the region's most powerful countries—Saudi Arabia and Iran. This rivalry plays itself out through several proxy wars as well as within the dynamic of imperialist competition that crisscrosses the Middle East, as outside powers such as the U.S., Russia and China seek to secure their own national interests.

Joseph Daher is a Swiss-Syrian socialist activist, founder of the Syria Freedom Forever blog and author of *Hezbollah: Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God*. He spoke to Ashley Smith about the roots of this crisis and the implications for the left around the world.

AS: The sequence of events surrounding the resignation of Lebanon's prime minister Saad Hariri has been confusing to say the least. What happened?

JD: Hariri precipitated a political crisis in Lebanon on November 4 when he announced his resignation from Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. Hariri surprised everyone, including his own party, the Future Movement and its allies. His resignation would have brought down the government and generated a new round of conflict with Lebanon over the dispensation of political power between the country's various sectarian parties.

It was no accident that Hariri made the announcement in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are Hariri's regional patron, and they had summoned him to their capital. Many believed he was being detained there against his wishes.

Hariri maintains deep connections with the Gulf kingdom. He holds Saudi citizenship, and his family's interests in the country date back to 1978, when his father, the former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri founded the Saudi construction company Oger. After Rafik was assassinated in 2005, Saad succeeded him in his political career and benefited from Riyadh's largesse—and, more sinisterly, its manipulation.

In his resignation speech, Hariri made startling new allegations. He claimed to have uncovered an assassination plot against him. He also accused Iran and Hezbollah of sowing strife in his country and the region.

But even the Lebanese Internal Security Forces, considered loyal to Hariri, denied knowledge of any assassination plot. And Hariri had not made such charges against Iran and Hezbollah since he was appointed Prime Minister in December 2016.

Clearly Saudi Arabia had compelled Hariri to toe their political line. His statements resembled nearly word for word charges against Iran made by Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (known by his initials MBS).

After Hariri's resignation, Saudi Arabia escalated its war of words against the Lebanese government, which includes Hezbollah. Riyadh even went so far as to claim that the government had declared war against it.

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The Lebanese political establishment refused to accept Hariri's resignation at face value. The president of Lebanon, Michel Aoun, stated it happened in "mysterious circumstances" abroad and went so far as to claim that Hariri was being held as hostage in Riyadh.

Hariri's own party, the Future Movement, asked for his return before making any decision regarding the premiership, and it implicitly criticized Saudi Arabia for pressuring Hariri.

Even Hariri's rival Hezbollah called for him to return to Lebanon, remain in office and preserve the current government, while condemning the Saudi interference in Lebanese affairs and warning against an Israeli attack. The group also stated that it was open to "any dialogue and any discussion" with Hariri.

Clearly, Saudi Arabia pressured Hariri into resigning as part of its escalating conflict with its main regional competitor Iran and its Lebanese subsidiary Hezbollah.

Saudi Arabia had been angry with Hariri and his Future Movement, its client in Lebanon, for sharing power with Hezbollah rather than challenging it. Riyadh feared that Hariri was adapting to Iran's increased influence in Lebanon on the heels of Tehran's successes in the region, particularly in Syria and Iraq.

Saudi Arabia aimed to disrupt the political accommodation between Hariri's Future Movement and Hezbollah. That deal had produced a cabinet headed by Hariri as prime minister and the election of Hezbollah's ally, Michel Aoun, as president.

Hariri, like the rest of Lebanon's warlords, opted for precarious coexistence over confrontation with Hezbollah. They all were simply intimidated by the group superior arms and willingness to use them. Similarly, Hariri and his party balked at challenging Hezbollah's dramatic intervention in Syria to preserve the regime of Bashar al-Assad against the Syrian Revolution.

Saudi Arabia responded by cutting off its funding of Hariri, bankrupting his family's company Oger, and ending its financial support for the Lebanese army. All of this precipitated a full-scale crisis in Lebanon and intensified conflict in the region as a whole.

AS: How did the imperial powers respond to this crisis?

JD: The U.S. and other Western powers voiced their disapproval of these developments. They affirmed their support for Hariri, encouraged him to revoke his resignation and urged him to preserve the current political settlement in Lebanon. They did not back Saudi Arabia and voiced concern about any escalation of its conflict with Iran.

United Nations Secretary General António Guterres warned of "devastating consequences" if there is a new conflict in the region. French President Emmanuel Macron, who traveled to Riyadh to meet with Hariri and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, said he did not share the kingdom's "very harsh opinions of Iran."

While U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson blamed Iran for much of the turmoil in the region, he said, "All the parties need to be careful about characterizing the start of yet another new war. My input would be: Let's be a little more cautious about what we say."

The State Department warned of using Lebanon as a base for "proxy conflicts" that could contribute to instability.

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Despite these criticisms of the Saudi manipulation of Hariri, the U.S. shares a common position with Riyadh that views Iran's rising power as a threat to ITS dominance in the region.

The Western imperialists' opposition to Saudi Arabia's provocation of the crisis explains France's intervention into the situation. With the implicit approval of the U.S., Macron got Saudi Arabia to release Hariri and then welcomed him to Paris.

Macron thus paved the way for Hariri to return to Lebanon, where he has rescinded his resignation, thereby diminishing the crisis for now. Hariri also declared that all Lebanese forces should commit to keeping the country out of regional conflicts, create partnerships with all outside powers and place Lebanon's interests above any other interests.

In a sign of ongoing tensions, however, Hariri also stated that he would not accept Hezbollah's positions that "affect our Arab brothers or target the security and stability of their countries."

Hariri's rescinding of his resignation represents a clear setback for Saudi Arabia and its attempt to harden up its front against Hezbollah and Iran in Lebanon. However, the regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran will continue and will probably have new and devastating consequences for Lebanon.

What, if any, are the causes of this crisis that are internal to Lebanon?

JD: The chief causes are to be found outside of Lebanon in the increasing regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the political developments of recent months in the region, especially Syria. The national unity government led by Hariri since 2016 actually allowed the various factions of the ruling class to stabilize the country.

The government adopted a budget for the first time since 2005. It continued to implement neoliberal policies, including escalating privatization of key sectors such as electricity. The ruling class used this political stability to prevent any challenges to the sectarian and bourgeois Lebanese political system that preserves their interests.

Western powers including the U.S. were satisfied with this settlement in Lebanon. They didn't want yet another crisis in the region.

But the stability was compromised by the regional tensions. In conjunction with Iran, Hezbollah escalated its military intervention in Syria in defense of Assad's dictatorship. Inevitably, this antagonized Saudi Arabia, which feared Iran would emerge with a greater sphere of influence.

Therefore, Saudi Arabia called in its chips with Hariri, threatening the political settlement in Lebanon. While Hariri has remained in power, his position and that of his Future Movement have been dramatically weakened on the Lebanese Sunni political scene.

A range of rivals, including former Justice Minister Ahmed Rifi and Salafist groups, may benefit. They are sectarian and have an antagonistic posture toward Hezbollah and Iran.

AS: What is the basis of the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran?

JD: Saudi Arabia and Iran have been battling each other for regional hegemony for years. Saudi Arabia feared that it

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had suffered an enormous setback after the U.S.'s disastrous occupation of Iraq. Instead of consolidating a U.S.-Saudi-Iraqi axis against Iran, the Iraqi government has increasingly fallen into the orbit of Iran.

Hostilities increased after the Obama administration cut a deal with Iran over its nuclear program, requiring it to give up pursuit of nuclear weapons in exchange for sanctions relief. This irritated Saudi Arabia, which feared that the U.S. was backing down from confronting Iran.

Riyadh saw Iran piling up victories, either directly or through its proxies in Syria and Iraq. In response, Saudi Arabia began to act increasingly to counteract Iranian influence throughout the region from Iraq to Syria, Yemen and Lebanon.

The Iranian gains should not be underestimated. They have secured a key ally in Iraq through the government of Haidar Abadi and his Shia fundamentalist Da'wa Party. Many other Shia military factions and parties with influence in Iraq are directly answerable to Iran.

In Syria, Iran has also gained unprecedented influence in the country in the past few years. While Russia has supplied air power in defense of Assad, Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah have provided tens of thousands of militiamen who have preserved Assad's reign. They will try to play a big role in the country from now on.

Saudi Arabia has balked at directly confronting Iran or its proxies in those two countries. But it has done so in Yemen. Houthi rebels, a religious group affiliated with the Zaydi sect of Shia Islam, along with forces loyal to former Yemeni dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, took control of large parts of the country in 2014. They have received backing from Iran.

Riyadh, supported by the U.S., has engaged in an aerial bombing campaign and blockade against the Houthi forces. The war has killed more than 10,000 people and left more than 20 million people, including 11 million children, in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. But the Houthis have maintained control of the capital of Sanaa and ports on the southern coast.

The Houthis took credit for a ballistic missile fired at the Saudi capital of Riyadh on November 5. The Saudis claimed the missile was supplied by Iran, saying it constituted a declaration of war. Iran strongly denied supplying any missiles to the rebels, saying that it would have been impossible to do so in the face of a Saudi-led air and sea blockade.

The other theater where the Saudis have challenged Iran's proxies has been in Lebanon. Indeed, as I have tried to show, the latest political crisis in Lebanon must be understood as a battle for influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

AS: What role has Israel played in these conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia?

JD: Relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel have never been closer, becoming nearly official. They both oppose the growing influence of Iran in the Middle East.

On November 16, Israel's military chief Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot gave an unprecedented interview to a Saudi newspaper underlining the ways in which the two countries could unite to counter Iran's influence in the region.

This interview, which was the first of its kind between an Israeli chief of staff and a Saudi news site, may indicate that

the romance between Israel and Saudi Arabia may finally go public, after taking place behind the scenes for a long time.

The Israeli official said that Tel Aviv had no intention of attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon, but would also not tolerate a strategic threat to its borders. Israel has nevertheless intensified its bombing in Syria against Hezbollah and Iranian-linked militias and locations where they are located.

Israel has on several occasions denounced the growing influence of Iran in Syria, and Benjamin Netanyahu declared that Israel will continue to enforce its security interests in Syria.

The winding down of the Syrian war and the near-end of the ISIS proto-state are ushering in a new phase of instability in the region. Washington, Tel Aviv and the Gulf states oppose increased Iranian regional power as a result of its gains in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. Far from peace, more conflict between the imperial and regional powers is on the horizon.

AS: How much of Saudi Arabia's aggressive assertion of its interests has to do with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's attempt to consolidate his accession to power?

JD: The Saudis were pursuing this conflict with Iran before Salman's move to push aside his rivals through his anti-corruption campaign. But Salman has no doubt escalated it for domestic and regional reasons.

He wants to consolidate his power through repression of his rivals, initiate a more aggressive foreign policy, establish a popular base through militarism and Saudi chauvinism, and attempt a dramatic reform of Saudi Arabia's economy.

At a deeper level, Salman's policies mark a turning point in the traditional patrimonial system. In this system, the ruling family divided up control of the state and its oil rent. They used their monies to pay off a vast network of businesses and patrons. This produced a precarious balance of power between family factions and their clientelist networks.

Salman is trying to bring an end to this factionalized state and consolidate power in his own hands. He has targeted key royal personalities, four ministers, and dozens of other officials and prominent businessmen such as Bakr bin Laden, the head of Saudi Arabia's biggest construction company, and the famous billionaire Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal, chairman of Kingdom Holding 4280.SE.

The sons of all four key men in the House of Saud who comprised the core of the family through the last four decades have been targeted. They are the sons of King Fahd bin Abdulaziz, King Abdullah, Prince Sultan and Prince Nayef.

This represents an unprecedented attack on the position and wealth of the pillars of al-Saud, including the three most prominent figures of the ruling Sudairi clan. The last prince theoretically capable of standing up to MBS, Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Nayef in title until June 2017, was dismissed from all his functions.

The purge against other members of the royal family is unprecedented in the kingdom's modern history. Family unity, which guaranteed the stability of the state since its foundation, has been shattered. The last event of this magnitude was the overthrow of King Saud by his brother Prince Faisal in 1964.

Contrary to liberal illusions that Salman is carrying out some kind of liberal political reform, he has also cracked down on any and all protest against the regime. Before his campaign against corruption, Salman had targeted intellectuals, academics, writers, feminists, human rights defenders and key Islamist figures.

To justify these repressive measures, MBS has put forward two main reasons to prepare the kingdom for the future. First, he claims that he needs to consolidate state control to make Saudi Arabia fit to take on what he calls Iranian expansionism.

Second, he contends that he needs a rationalized state to implement his project of economic reform and austerity called "Vision 2030." Its objective is to attract foreign and local investment to diversify its economy away from oil and help the private sector flourish by creating policies and providing security for private capital.

This project aims to create 450,000 jobs in the private sector by 2020 and bolster the private-sector share of GDP to 60 percent from 40 percent in 2014.

Saudi Arabia has said it aims to raise around \$200 billion in the next several years through privatization programs in 16 sectors ranging from oil to health care, education, airports and grain milling. In other words, Salman is ushering in a new project of neoliberalism with Saudi characteristics.

AS: What are the positions of the imperial powers in this crisis—in particular, the U.S.? And what does this mean for the balance of imperial power in the region?

JD: As I have said, the U.S. and the other Western imperial powers opposed Saudi Arabia's attempt to break up the Lebanese government.

But American policy is mired in a host of contradictions that flow from its weakened position after its setback in Iraq. Of course, the U.S. remains the most important power in the world, but it has witnessed a relative decline against international and regional rivals, particularly in the Middle East.

The failure of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the global economic and financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 were severe blows to the hegemony of the U.S. This left more space for other imperialist powers like China and Russia, but also benefited regional powers throughout the world. The relative decline of the U.S. allowed all of these states to act more autonomously and even at times contrary to U.S. interests.

This is particularly visible in the Middle East. Russia has been able to increase its influence and play a significant role in Syria in saving the Assad regime, while various regional states like Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel have played a growing role in the region, intervening in the revolutionary processes in support of various actors in conflict with popular demands for democracy, social justice and equality.

The rivalries and competitions among all these actors has intensified conflicts and tensions while extending the counterrevolution's influence throughout the region.

At the same time, it is important to note that the various imperialists and regional powers, despite their rivalries, can collaborate when the global imperialist system is threatened. For example, they all have common interests in the defeat of the popular revolutions in the region, including in Syria, and in the maintaining of the status quo.

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All these regimes are capitalist powers and enemies of popular uprisings. They are interested in a stable political environment that allows them to build and develop their political power and the accumulation of capital at the expense of the popular classes.

Progressive forces should not choose between international imperialist powers or regional forces that compete for political gains and over the exploitation of resources and peoples. The struggle of progressive forces must always be in favor of the interests of the working and popular classes in their struggle for liberation and emancipation against all forms of imperialism.

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