



**PERSPECTIVES**

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## **The Political Crisis in Lebanon: An Opportunity to Strengthen Israeli-Saudi Cooperation Against Iran**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** By strengthening cooperation behind the scenes, Saudi Arabia and Israel can take significant advantage of the political crisis in Lebanon and the regional developments that may result from it. Riyadh and Jerusalem should do their best to cooperate vis-à-vis the superpowers involved in Syria and Iraq, especially the US, as they attempt to shift the strategic balance towards their aligning interests.

Two dramatic events occurred recently that have the potential to affect the balance of power in the Middle East, particularly in Lebanon. First, on November 4, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned while in Saudi Arabia, a move suspected to have been directed from the royal palace in Riyadh. A day later, it was reported that Saudi Arabia had intercepted a ballistic missile launched from Yemen by Houthi rebels who had intended to hit the Riyadh airport. On November 22, Hariri put his resignation on hold, but there is no sign of political stability in Lebanon for the foreseeable future.

Saudi Arabia backed Hariri's intention to resign and directly accused Iran and Hezbollah of smuggling missiles into Yemen and teaching the Houthis how to operate them. Riyadh went so far as to claim that launching the missile towards the airport could be considered a "declaration of war" by Lebanon.

These statements and actions join the boycott imposed on Qatar by the Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, over what they claim to be cooperation between Doha, Tehran, Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Although Saudi Arabia and Iran have exchanged sharp words in the past, attempts have been made to bridge their differences. Last August, for example, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif announced that Tehran and Riyadh were planning reciprocal diplomatic visits.

Now, it seems the hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran has reached a new peak and threatens to become even more overt, raising fears of a direct military confrontation – especially in light of the worsening rhetoric of Saudi Arabia and the success of Iran's hegemonic ambitions in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Riyadh is no longer satisfied with cautious statements against Iran. It now chooses to accuse Tehran directly of responsibility for actions carried out by Shiite militias in Syria and Yemen. Thus, the desert kingdom is moving towards a more aggressive, less diplomatic foreign policy as it deepens its involvement in the Middle East in general and Lebanon in particular.

These developments have an impact on Israel, which is also threatened by Iran's hegemonic ambitions. Tehran's attempts to entrench in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; to expand its control over Lebanon; to create a "land bridge" from Tehran to the Mediterranean; to exploit the 2015 nuclear agreement to build military force and gain international legitimacy; and to develop its ballistic missile project menace Jerusalem as much as Riyadh.

Because they share a common threat, it is in the interests of both Israel and Saudi Arabia to deepen their secret cooperation, especially through diplomatic means – even if there are limits on such cooperation. Those limits include a lack of domestic legitimacy in Riyadh for cooperation with Israel; Saudi Arabia's focus on domestic affairs; and the involvement of superpowers in the region. These can be overcome by tightening covert cooperation; concentrating the foreign policy of both countries on the Iranian issue; and operating as one when dealing with the superpowers.

### **Opportunities for Saudi-Israeli cooperation**

Hariri's intention to resign, and the consequent leaving of the Lebanese government to Hezbollah, constitutes an opportunity for Riyadh and Jerusalem to exert strong combined pressure on the US administration to change its position. So far, Washington has separated the Lebanese government from Hezbollah, and has even praised Hariri and his government for their purported fight against terrorism.

Changing the American position can strengthen Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis Hezbollah, which has exploited the cover it received from the legitimate Lebanese government with Hariri at its head. A declaration that all of Lebanon

is now Hezbollah would be a resounding message to send to the Americans. It would legitimize a future Israeli attack on the entire Lebanese country and its infrastructure as part of a military operation against Hezbollah.

Another opportunity for Saudi-Israeli cooperation concerns the nuclear agreement between Iran and the six powers. In both Jerusalem and Riyadh, the nuclear agreement is viewed as a bad deal with significant weaknesses that can ultimately whitewash Iran as a nuclear state.

US President Donald Trump's recent decision not to ratify the nuclear agreement gives the demands of Israel and Saudi Arabia a tailwind. The two countries, with the help of the US, should take advantage of the situation in Lebanon to embark on a "diplomatic attack" in Europe, Russia, and China, and increase the pressure to improve the terms of the agreement. This is especially true with regard to Moscow, as a complete Iranian takeover of Lebanon and Syria is not in Russia's interest. Moscow has hegemonic ambitions of its own in those areas.

Israel and Saudi Arabia can also take joint advantage of the political crisis in Lebanon to damage Iran's ballistic missile project. While Trump has declared a new US policy towards Iran, his administration has not yet formulated concrete steps to impede Tehran's military project. The two countries should leverage the opportunity and try to influence the agenda in Congress and particularly the Senate, which is responsible for planning and setting out the details of the overall policy as set out by the White House. Israel and Saudi Arabia have a better chance of influencing those details together than they do separately.

Saudi Arabia and Israel have a clear common interest in preventing an Iranian "land bridge" to the Mediterranean. In the past year, Riyadh has taken practical steps towards cooperating with and restoring relations with Baghdad – relations that had been wracked since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 – in order to prevent this Iranian foothold. Israel is working towards the same goal by both military and diplomatic means.

The abandonment of Lebanon's political arena to Hezbollah would mean a *de facto* Iranian takeover of Lebanon. This has given renewed weight to the warnings expressed by Jerusalem and Riyadh about Tehran's hegemonic ambitions in the region. Riyadh and Jerusalem can use the situation to increase pressure on American policy in the Syrian arena and in Iraq. Until now, the US has focused on fighting ISIS and had abandoned the issue of Iranian-backed Shiite militias operating in both countries.

Israeli-Saudi cooperation in the Iraqi-Syrian arena can also be beneficial to the Russian government, which is currently working with Iran in Syria. Russian

foreign policy in the Middle East is largely successful thanks to the "divide and rule" strategy. If Riyadh and Jerusalem join hands with Moscow, the combined pressure might bear fruit by reducing Tehran's presence in Syria and distancing the Iranians who remain there from the Iraqi border. Russia might also agree to distance the Iranian presence in Syria from the border with Israel.

By strengthening cooperation behind the scenes, especially diplomatic cooperation, Saudi Arabia and Israel can take significant advantage of the political crisis in Lebanon and the regional developments that may result from it. Riyadh and Jerusalem should do their best to operate as one vis-à-vis the superpowers involved in Syria and Iraq, especially the US, as they attempt to shift the strategic balance towards their aligning interests. Such diplomatic cooperation is a power multiplier: it has greater influence than diplomatic activity engaged in by a single state.

At the same time, Israel must continue to use hard power whenever necessary. In so doing, it is preferable that Israel apply the strategy of the "gray zone," which allows for ambiguity and denial capability. This would reduce the likelihood of a response by the Assad regime, Iran, or Hezbollah.

Jerusalem must not fail to take advantage of the potential fall of the Lebanese government entirely into the hands of Hezbollah to prepare the ground for a future military operation in Lebanon, even if no such operation is planned for the near future. It is in Israel's interest to establish and accumulate legitimacy ahead of time, both in the Sunni Arab world and among the superpowers operating in the region.

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