

Hariri returns to Saudi Arabia, meets with King Salman

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Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri travelled to Saudi Arabia for talks with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, his first trip to the kingdom since his shock resignation announcement, which was later recanted, from there last November.

Hariri also met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz and Saudi Ambassador to the United States Prince Khalid bin Salman.

Official statements in Saudi and Lebanese media said bilateral relations and recent political developments in Lebanon were discussed during the meetings, which were described as “excellent” by sources in attendance.

The new round of Riyadh talks comes at a crucial time for both states.

For Hariri, the meeting is seen as a sign of support from Saudi Arabia, the leading Sunni Muslim country and a major regional powerhouse, as Lebanon gears up for parliamentary elections on May 6, in which Hariri’s Sunni bloc will compete for seats and political influence.

The Lebanese also hope to mobilise Saudi support for a donor conference April 6 in Paris. The conference aims to raise \$16 billion in investments for the ailing Lebanese economy. Saudi Arabia, which supported Lebanon after its 15-year civil war, has scaled down its contributions in recent years.

“The visit is a step by Saudi Arabia

in a positive direction,” Mohammad Qabbani, a Lebanese lawmaker with Hariri’s Future Movement told the Wall Street Journal.

“It has the potential – and we hope it does – to return to the historically intimate relationship between the two countries.”

Ahead of Hariri’s visit, a Saudi delegation to Beirut, led by adviser to the royal court Nizar al-Aloula and accompanied by Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Walid al-Yaacoub, met with high-ranking Lebanese officials, including President Michel Aoun and Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri.

Aloula delivered a message to Aoun in support of Lebanon’s sovereignty from King Salman.

Saudi Arabia’s invitation to Hariri was extended during a meeting between him and Aloula, which the Lebanese prime minister described as “excellent.”

Hariri announced he was resigning last November in a speech from Riyadh, leading to speculation in Lebanese media and political circles.

Pro-Hezbollah media claimed Hariri was being held in Riyadh against his will as part of the Saudi anti-corruption campaign. That theory was refuted when Hariri travelled to the United Arab Emirates and France before returning to Lebanon. He withdrew his resignation in early December.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed told the Washington Post he had been unfairly criticised over Hariri’s resignation. Crown Prince Mohammed said Hariri is now “in a better position” in Lebanon regarding Iran-backed Hezbollah.

Relations between Riyadh and Beirut soured in 2016 after Lebanese



Crucial time. Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (R) receives Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri at the royal palace in Riyadh, on February 28.

(SPA)

Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, a Hezbollah political ally, refused to vote on a joint Arab statement condemning an attack on the Saudi diplomatic mission in Iran.

Some Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members banned their citizens from travelling to Lebanon and reduced their diplomatic presence in Beirut. All six GCC members designated Hezbollah a terrorist organisation and Riyadh suspended a \$3 billion aid package intended for the Lebanese military.

Relations improved after a deal

was brokered in which Aoun, who is aligned with Hezbollah, became president of Lebanon in October 2016 under the condition that Hariri would return as prime minister.

Saudi Arabia appointed an ambassador to Lebanon in February 2017.

Sami Nader, head of the Beirut-based Levant Institute for Strategic Affairs, told Bloomberg News that “it is in Lebanon’s interest to maintain good ties with Saudi Arabia for the sake of its economy given that it’s the major source of remittances.”

“Saudi Arabia cannot leave the

scene empty for Iran to fill the gap and needs to counterbalance Iran’s increasing clout,” he said.

Walid al-Bukhari, charge d’affaires at the Saudi Embassy in Lebanon, who was part of the delegation that invited Hariri to Riyadh and attended the meeting with Saudi King Salman, wrote on his official Twitter account: “#Lebanon... No matter how long we stay apart, we will be together again.”

Mohammed Alkhereiji is the Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.

Saudi Arabia restructures military hierarchy with Yemeni war in mind

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In apparent reaction to the stagnating 3-year war in Yemen, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud replaced several Saudi armed forces commanders, including the military’s chief of staff.

The wide-ranging reshuffle included the promotion of a younger generation of military officials, including new heads of the kingdom’s land and air forces. The Saudi government also announced it would overhaul its Defence Ministry.

General Abdul Rahman bin Saleh al-Bunyan was replaced as chief of staff by General Fayyadh bin Hamid al-Rwaili, a former commander in the Royal Saudi Air Force, and Khaled bin Hussain al-Biyari was appointed assistant defence minister under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, who serves as defence minister.

The shake-up at the Defence Ministry was reportedly meant to create a more efficient fighting force while “ridding the military of top-level leaders resistant to change,” RAND Corporation Policy Analyst Becca Wasser told the Wall Street Journal.

An official Saudi statement said King Salman had approved a document addressing the modernisation of the Defence Ministry, “including the vision and strategy of the ministry’s modernisation programme, the operational pattern targeting its modernisation, the organisational structure, governance and human resources requirements.”

The change among Saudi military leaders comes when the country is entangled in the war in Yem-



Honing their edge. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz (L) receives a newly appointed military chief in Riyadh, on February 27.

(SPA)

en, where it is leading a military coalition fighting in support of the internationally recognised government against Iran-allied Houthi rebels.

The war has become more complex with the Houthi rebels reportedly upgrading their military capabilities courtesy of Iran, despite an arms embargo demanded by the UN Security Council. Evidence gathered after the firing of several ballistic missiles towards Riyadh indicated Iranian involvement in supplying the Houthis with the missiles.

A resolution introduced by the United Kingdom calling for re-

newed sanctions on Yemen because of Iran’s interference was vetoed by Russia; however, the council unanimously agreed to extend the Yemeni arms embargo.

Following the failure of the draft resolution, US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley released a statement blasting Russia for defending the “terrorist-sponsoring regime in Iran.”

“In spite of a mountain of credible, independent evidence showing Iran violated the Yemen arms embargo, resulting in a series of attacks on civilian targets, Russia prevented accountability and endangered the entire region,”

Haley said.

Also affecting the stalemate in Yemen was infighting between the internationally recognised government of Yemeni President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC), which are both fighting the Houthi militia.

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Fighting broke out between the two allies on January 28 after a deadline set by the STC for Hadi to dissolve the government over allegations of corruption and incompetence passed. This led to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates scrambling to send envoys for talks that resulted in a truce.

Another side effect of the war in Yemen has been fighting against the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which are trying to cement their presence in the war-torn country. The United Arab Emirates recently began an operation in southern Yemen targeting AQAP.

The UAE state news agency reported that operation included Yemeni Shabwa Elite Forces, supported by the UAE, in Shabwa province. AQAP suffered “significant losses” in Wadi Al-Masini in Hadramawt province.

The operation reportedly destroyed al-Qaeda strongholds in Shabwa and several al-Qaeda fighters surrendered. Most of the area was secured by the Shabwa Elite Forces.

AFED exhibition nurtures Saudi defence industry

The Arab Weekly staff

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As Saudi Arabia restructures its Defence Ministry to reflect ever-growing regional challenges, there is also the kingdom’s pledge to create an indigenous military defence industry.

The recent Armed Forces Exhibition for Diversity of Requirements and Capabilities (AFED 2018) in Riyadh introduced some of the government’s defence objectives.

AFED 2018, under the banner “Our industry, Our strength,” included the participation of more than 68 international companies looking to work with Saudi firms to support and develop a national defence industry in line with global standards and quality specifications.

Creating a home-grown military industry serves domestic economic considerations. Saudi Major-General Attiya al-Maliki told Dubai-based Al Arabiya that the kingdom could save \$8.8 billion by localising 50% of military spending, injecting the funds into the Saudi economy.

Maliki said AFED 2018 had 80,000 manufacturing opportunities from international participants, with 800 Saudi firms participating. However, he acknowledged challenges facing Saudi Arabia in creating a military industry, particularly regarding the lack of human resources and technical abilities.

The Defence Ministry is still determined to develop local industry, he said.

“Our aim is to establish partnerships between foreign companies and Saudi factories, which translates into three levels: transferring technology and knowledge, reducing supply times and achieving financial savings,” Maliki said.